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OR,
THE RACKET AT ANGELS' FLAT.

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AUTHOR OF "PISTOL PARDS," "HANDS UP,"
"THREE HANDSOME SPORTS," "A SPORT
IN SPECTACLES," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.
STRANGERS AT THE FLAT.

It was entirely unintentional on the part of Slim Jimmy, but the fact was that the passengers by his coach generally preferred being landed at Poison Pete's, where they could wet their throats with the choice mountain dew for which his place was noted, to being carried direct to the stage office at the other end of the building.

It was in the early part of the evening when Jimmy drove up with a flourish and halted in front of the Best Chance, and before he thought of the oddity of the thing his one passenger had sprung out and the vehicle had moved on.

And if ever a passenger got out of his "hearse" at Angels' Flat that looked the lady all over, Miss Della Venner was that one.

"THAR YER HEV IT THEN; AN' YOU GENTLEMEN WILL ALLOW IT WAR A SQUARE DEAL, 'THOUT A FLYER?" AND THE PISTOL SPORT, RAISING HIS HAT, HALF BOWED, AS IF IN APOLOGY FOR HAVING HAD TO THUS TREAT A WOMAN.

Even the toughs at Poison Pete's admitted that; and they were experts in questions relating to social science.

She was just about the medium height, with clear complexion, frank face, ripe, red lips, tapering hands, slender little feet, and was dressed neatly but for wear. She looked up at Pete, standing in the glare of the light at his door, in a curious but by no means timid way.

"This is Angels' Flat?" she said to Pete, who was the most conspicuous figure there.

"You kin risk yer coin on ther truth ov that, an' add that this are ther Best Chance Saloon, run by P'ison Pete, an' ther stage stashun are ther other end ov ther b'ildin'. Keep yer bizzy ter git ther ropes hyar at fu'st, marm, but you'll find us squar' when yer knows us better. Goin' ter stay, marm?"

Pete, the old sinner, was not in the least abashed, and did not even take the trouble to remove the stub of a pipe from between his teeth.

The young lady gave him a stare, of wonder rather than anger, but answered promptly:

"Thank you; I think I have my bearings now. I shall remain in this neighborhood some time, though not exactly in the town. I am Simon Venner's daughter, and have come to take possession of the Big Hope Mine."

"You hev?"

Poison Pete's exclamation indicated a sudden revulsion of feeling; a moment later he seemed almost ashamed of it, for he added:

"Excuse me, marm, but being ez you're a stranger, ov course you don't know. Johnny Chase are runnin' that, an' ther same Johnny's wife are a-runnin' him, an' both is a-runnin' of ther Flat. I'm sorry fur yer, little woman, if yer come hyar a-countin' on a big thing in ther Big Hope, an' I wouldn't advise yer ter chip. Fact are, ef I war advisin', I'd say: go on with ther hearse. It's no good ter stay hyar, an' it'll take yer to a good bit safer place. An' that's pure, onadulterated charity. Ef yer don't, you'll find 'commerdashuns at ther other end ov ther b'ildin'; an' if they don't treat yer r'ght, let me know. So long. I won't keep yer hyar a-chinnin'."

In spite of the interest he took in the young lady, he turned and went back into his den, leaving her to find her way without further explanation.

A dozen men were in the Best Chance—a dozen bad men, who had been staring out over Pete's shoulder at the lovely apparition. Now they either took their position on the street, or craned their necks out of the doorway, watching her until she disappeared in the stage office at the other end of the long, low, rambling house which sheltered so many pursuits.

The horses had been changed by this time, the driver was cracking his whip, the stage was rolling out of camp. Evidently the young lady whose name was Della Venner had come to stay.

The loafers from Poison Pete's went back into the saloon, and began discussing the new arrival. She had created a sensation, and everybody had something to say; though their remarks would have been decidedly discouraging to the young lady if she had heard them.

What she had said had been heard by all, and their criticisms were earnest.

"I say, fellers, it's a dog-gone pity, ain't it? It don't pear so bad ter hev a man wiped out; he can hit back, an' ef he ain't quick enough, that's his lookout. But a woman—a bit ov kaliker, a slick young heffer, sich as those be!—ther or't ter be a committee p'inted ter show her ther danger."

"What's ther use ov that? Didn't Pete tell her jest how ther game war runnin'? Ef she stays after that, it ain't our lookout; an' ef it war, it wouldn't make a diffabitterance. Johnny would get in his work; an' the madame does hate a woman, anyhow."

"She's tryin' ter Kerry a contract sich ez she don't rightly onderstand. It wouldn't be so bad ef ther hull town called on her an' explained jest how ther game runs hyar. Ef she tries to monkey with the Big Hope, ther Chases will git rid of her, sure, ef they hev to furnish a coffin an' shut up ther shaft."

So the talk began, and it kept on with remarkable unanimity of feeling. Every one was willing to commiserate the probable fate of the brave little lady, but no one was willing to hazard an opinion that there was the least chance for her to hold her own. Nobody suggested that Chase might let up when he found what sort of an antagonist he had.

Even Poison Pete had his suggestion to make.

"You fellers heard me, an' I gi'n it to her square—a heap sight squarer than most fellers like ter talk when Johnny Chase are s'posed ter be at ther other end ov ther string. I don't want him gunnin' 'round this ranch, but I tho'rt she o'rt ter know what sorter a game she war talkin' ov buckin' ag'inst when she war a stranger in camp—a woman, an' no sign ov backin'."

"Hold on, pard!" exclaimed a cheery but altogether unfamiliar voice; "I ain't prezackly yearnin' fur a racket, but sooner than see ther fun stop, I'm a-backin' ov her game meself. What's it all about, anyhow? It don't make

much difference; but a feller likes ter know what he's doin' when he lays in fur a frolic."

Everybody turned toward the speaker. He must have made his entry by the opposite door about the time the stage drew up in front of the Best Chance, and so escaped attention in the interest caused by that event.

"An' who ther thunder be you?" asked Poison Pete, turning an inquiring gaze in the direction of the owner of the voice. "When Angels' Flat passes out w'ot's ther use fer you ter chip?"

"That's ther time ter look arter ther pot. I ain't sayin' thet I'm a howlin' hurricane; but I'm Snapshot Sam ther man frum 'way down, an' ez fur ez I know ez good ez they make 'em. I'm allers backin' cripples, wimmin an' kids. Ef ther 'casion requires I'm right hyar now."

"Them's allers bin my motter; but I ain't on it when Johnny Chase sez, nixey. Tell yer what it are, stranger; yer hed better set 'em up fur ther house, an' then travel on. After what you've sed you'll find Angels' Flat a mighty on-healthy place fur a man 'bout your size."

"What's ther matter with Johnny? Why ain't he hyar? I'm waitin' ter hear full per-tick'lers. Ef Pete hyar 'll set 'em up you kin be tellin' ther yarn while he's gittin' ther glasses ready."

As he spoke he spun a gold coin down on the bar with a careless air, and then leaned back in the corner where he had originally propped himself, evidently waiting for the rest of the story.

He wasn't bad looking and certainly he did not appear to be a very desperate man. His dress was not that of a pronounced rough but that of a "pilgrim"—half sport, half cowboy. He possessed remarkably shrewd eyes, with which he had been peering about as if in search of some particular thing. His real shape or size could hardly be told from the amount of clothing with which it was incased, and visible weapons he had none. Altogether he did not strike Angels' Flat as being a man who was likely to take rank as a "chief," and though they recognized the fact that they knew who Johnny Chase was while the man that was talking probably did not, the very wildness of the idea of such a man as he bucking against the king-pin of the camp was enough to make them set him down as a good-for-nothing and a blow-hard.

Nevertheless the man had coin; and as Poison Pete allowed no man to be robbed in his place except after the standard, legitimate methods of table and card, it was not considered the proper thing to sit down on him too heavy until a portion at least of his wealth had been deposited where it would do more good to the community at large.

For that reason the Angels present ranged themselves unanimously at the bar, and tossed off their poison at Snapshot Sam's expense, in apparently the best of humors.

"Well?"

The last tumbler had been set back empty when the stranger propounded the question, and the gang looked around in an uncertain way, which said that no one cared to give the answer. Two or three scowled, two or three shook their heads, and Poison Pete muttered, yet loud enough to be heard:

"Nixey."

"Oh, come now, you fellers ain't afeard ter split ther hull truth right out ez she orter be. Why, up at Poker Flat they said thar wa'n't no spot on this hyar football ez laid over Angels' Flat fur sand; an' now when I git hyar, an' axes how ther game runs some one sez 'Johnny Chase, an' then yer all dry up ez though yer war so many b'iled owls. I'm a-talkin' now, you hear me?' What's Johnny Chase bin a-doin' hyar; an' what's his game got ter do with ther little bit of caliker ez sed she war goin' ter freeze on ter ther Big Hope? I want ter know, fur, ez I sed afore, I'm willin' ter back her game."

"Anything more ter say, stranger? 'Cause yer 'pears ter be long-winded, an' yer may jest ez well shoot off ther hull string while ye'r at it. I'll bet yer two ter one ez Johnny comes along hisself afore yer git through, ef ye'r make it much longer; an' ef he does, an' you're axin' questions, I'll bet twelve ter six ez—wal, yer won't ax no more."

"I'll take it, an' let yer hold yer own stakes. When Snapshot Sam don't ax questions it'll be 'cause he's dead—an' he comes ov a mighty long-winded family. But, that ain't here ner there. Who are Johnny; an' whar does he an' ther Big Hope kin in at? It's ther last time ov askin'. Ef yer can't answer a civil question you may hear me ax it oncivil afore I git through."

His answer to the interruption of Poison Pete was given in a sharp, irritated tone, and it looked very much as though he meant a quarrel with somebody—if Johnny Chase wasn't around he might be able to begin with the worthy proprietor.

A red-hot gleam came into Pete's eyes and his hand dropped out of sight for an instant behind the bar, but it rose again, empty. It took an effort; but there were ducats in the distance, and he answered once more after the careless way that generally belonged to him:

"If you haven't had it straight enough thar

ain't many ov ther boyees 'll be willin' ter give it much straighter. It ain't no good luck talkin' 'bout ther Chase family—it's mighty apt ter start a eperdemic. Thar's plenty ov men hyar—abouts ez are no slouches, an' fuller ov grit ner a grindstun; but whar thar ain't a thing ter be made buckin' ag'in' his game, an' it's almost sar't'in death ter do it—excuse me. Duz yer take us fur all durned fools?"

"That's lib'ral. Wal, no. Ef that's ther lay-out, Gospel cloth an' angel's box, I ain't got no more ter say. Mebbe I kin git more informa-shun an' wuss whisky som'eres else. P'raps ef I begun ter paint ther town red ter-night I'd wake up Johnny hisself, an' he'd answer ther problem. Possibly some one with more pluck an' less jedgment kin go a leetle better. But ef mean-whiles, ther gentleman should come in hyar, present my compliments ter him an' his lady an' say that Snapshot Sam are around an' open fur biz."

"Dry up, sonny," hissed a sharp whisper in his ear. "Hyar's the madame now!"

CHAPTER II.

AN ARIZONA COCKTAIL.

POISON PETE, when the evening was young and fires were banked, generally preserved a semblance to decency and order. The stranger had found such to be the case since his entry, yet he would have noticed now a change in the atmosphere, even without the warning, and he looked quickly toward the door, just in time to see a new-comer, who entered with a light, springy step, and glanced fearlessly around.

Pete was watching the man, and noted down the look of astonishment on his countenance, as his eyes had their first glimpse of the face of Mrs. John Chase, better known to the people of Angels' Flat, at such times as she and her lord were not present, as Rustling Kate.

A good many men before Snapshot Sam had been struck dumb at sight of the Queen of the Angels, after forming their ideals from the indefinite talk of the town; but there was something in his eyes that Poison Pete did not remember to have seen in the eyes of any of the others, and he turned hastily toward Mrs. Chase.

She might be looking for some one, since her glance halted on each figure a little longer than was usual with her. He saw her gaze sweep over the man in the corner at the bar, even lingering on him a little as she noted that he was a stranger, but there were no signs of recognition, and the saloon-keeper was fairly puzzled as to what meaning he should take out of it all.

Mrs. Chase, however, evidently saw that there was something agitating the souls of the hangers-on at the Best Chance.

"What's the matter, Pete?" she said sharply. "What's going on here?"

At Angels' Flat she could not have gone into another place where she could have expected less sympathy. Poison Pete did not exactly swear by John Chase, even if he never disputed his chieftainship, and there were men enough there who would have been glad to kick the lion if he was only dead. It was not very likely that any one would show disrespect to her, but for all that, she knew as well as could be that there were enough there to hate her most cordially in spite of her wondrous beauty.

For beautiful she was, and of a style that might well be startling to a stranger who had heard of her as the spouse of desperado John Chase, and as his fitting mate. She was a fair-faced little woman, with the tiniest of hands and feet, a lithe, swaying form, a mass of yellow hair sweeping down over her exquisitely-rounded shoulders, and great, blue eyes that had at times a far-away look in them, though now and then they could sparkle or glow. To some persons, no doubt, the words that dropped so sharply from her perfect lips would have been a shock. Here, in Angels' Flat, where the residents all knew her, or of her, well enough, there was nothing but matter-of-fact in them—and as such they were understood.

No one at once answered. Poison Pete was watching the two with a curiosity that had dated from the moment of her entrance, while the rest hesitated to speak.

Her hand dropped down to her trim waist in a motion that everybody understood, and she looked around, again, this time in search of an expression instead of a face.

"Are you all dumb? What deviltry have you been plotting that you are stricken silent when I come? Speak up some one, can't ycu? or, do you want the town painted red to-night, and have the artistic performance begin at the Best Chance?"

"Ex-cuse me, miss, er madame, but this hyar are my circus, sorter like. I've jist struck ther burg, an' I've b'en solicitin' help ter turn on ther irregatin' sluiceways. It's my set-'em-up, an' ef you'd j'ine us all you'd really do me proud. I'm Snapshot Sam, ther man from 'way down, an' I've come hyar ter stay."

She made a gesture which Sam interpreted to suit himself.

"Once more, Peter, set 'em up; an' ez you perobably know this lady's vanity set it out, regardless. I'm in luck so fur, an' I wouldn't be

wonderin' ef I met all the Angels ov the Flat afore the night's over."

"And a good many that don't belong there," thought Poison Pete to himself, as he heard the invitation, and watched its reception.

To his surprise Rustling Kate stepped gracefully forward.

"Thanks. It is not often I indulge; but with a stranger, and one who looks worth the cultivating, I'll at least go through the form. If Pete's Poison does for me my ghost shall haunt you; and perhaps some of my friends will see you later."

"Thanks; yer best, Peter. A leetle wine an' a heap big of whisky will just about fill the bill. Step up, boys, an' drink hearty."

It had never happened before in his house, and Pete was almost wild over the mild acceptance; yet he turned to his decanters as coldly, as though he had heard nothing.

The little lady stepped forward, smiling and graceful, and turned up the decanter with a steadiness that showed she was not altogether unacquainted with the operation, half filling the ordinary tumbler that Pete set before her. Then she turned to the hesitating crowd.

"I think you must have heard the invitation, gentlemen; don't be bashful on my account."

There was a certain amount of sternness in her tones that was easily understood, and after that there was no holding back, but every man placed himself in communicating distance of the bar, and the decanter began to pass along the line, beginning at the furthest end, and finally reaching Snapshot Sam.

"A moment, if you please," interrupted Mrs. Chase, as he was reaching for it.

"This is Angels' Flat, and we have a way here of looking after our visitors. It would be a shame if we did not set up our best. Peter, can't you get together something nice for our friend? Make it good and strong, and throw in all the condiments, like you did for the young man from Glory Gulch, who came down a short time ago to paint the town red. You remember his vanity?"

"In other words, an Arizona cocktail?"

The suggestion came from Sam himself. It was made in a more careless tone even than he had yet used, and Pete looked around at him with more uncertainty than ever.

"Oh, sling it together, Peter. I really want to see how you mix such things 'round here. I've heard of them, but I don't know that I ever tasted ther real, simon-pure article. Live an' learn, my boy, an' ther longer yer live ther more yer kin learn."

"The gentleman is right," added Kate. "The way you get th'm up is actually artistic, and I have no doubt that when he once gets outside of it, he will remember the recipe as long as he lives."

The cool tone of the man puzzled her a little, no doubt; but it was evident that she did not intend to halt in her programme.

The reader has probably seen enough in print in regard to that peculiar vileness known as the "Arizona cocktail" not to require any extended account of all that goes to make it up.

The composition simply depends upon the resources of the establishment; and the unhappy tenderfoot who has the drink to worry with may rest happy if the bartender stops any where short of aquafortis. Bad eggs, coal oil, and a saturation of red pepper are the very least he can expect. As the man behind the bar is protected by the guns of the men in front he is apt to do his best—and Poison Pete was known to be an expert.

"Don't hessertate, Peter, but do ther thing up right; only take keer that yer don't slop it over. I'm pertick'ler about my drinks, an' don't want ter have no muss over it."

"Don't be alarmed, I'll put it up jest ez ther madame sez, an' ef it goes ag'in' ther grain don't say it's ther fault ov ther house."

And he gravely began to concoct the article called for, all the time wondering what would be the outcome of the strange affair. It looked very much as though Mrs. Chase intended that Snapshot Sam should drink the nauseous concoction, and just as much that he did not expect to. Surely no one in his senses would view the preparations with such unruffled interest, if he imagined he would have to smell even, let alone taste.

The men at the bar drew back a little and watched also. If this thing went on it might put them in a dilemma. It was not a safe thing to interfere with the lady when she had set her head on shooting; it wouldn't be the correct thing to allow the stranger to shoot her in case he refused, and was lucky enough to get the drop; and outside of one of these two ways there appeared to be no other outcome, after things had once gone that far.

"There you are," said Pete, as he placed the goblet on the bar, within easy reaching distance of the stranger. "Ef it don't suit him that's a matter betwixt you an' him. I done the best I knowed how, an' I think he'll find it up ter natur'."

"And he will proceed to get himself outside of it in the quickest time possible," said Mrs. Chase, with a charming little smile.

"Certainly; but I ain't a hog, miss. Couldn't

Pete mix up another? I don't want ter have all ther fun myself; an' ther' ain't more ner enough fur one in this."

He looked up earnestly, and it was pretty clear that he had his eyes fixed very sharply on the lady while he spoke, though no one believed that he would have a chance if she chose to draw. She was quick as lightning, as more than one rough had found to his sorrow before she became thoroughly understood by the citizens of Angels.

The insinuation did not move her a bit, though her eyes were as sharply used as his own.

"Thanks, but you ordered my drinks already, and I have taken the privilege of selecting yours. It is too late now for any changes. Stand up, gentlemen, and we will see that it all goes down together. And you, miserable vagabond, did you think to come into this camp and work your own sweet will without any to molest? A woman is as free to come into Poison Pete's as is a man, and I'll grind that idea into your head if I have to do it with a derringer. Drink, and drink hearty."

As she spoke with a swift motion she threw out her hand, and Snapshot Sam was looking into the barrel of an ugly little derringer.

The man never winced. He did not even betray a shadow of uneasiness; but looked at her with a pleasant smile.

"Bless yer soul, leetle woman, I've seen jest sich tools afore, an' don't mind 'em wuth a cent; but that's all a-wanderin' frum ther p'int. We was all ter start level an' drink fair. I ain't wuth a cent 'thout company, an' I ain't one ov ther kind ez drinks alone. I ain't refused nothin', an' I don't think it would be healthy fur even you, with Jack Chase behind yer, ter shoot down a tenderfoot afore he had a chance ter down yer own mixtur'. If I'm willin' ter swaller that you oughtn't ter go back on yer own word, ter keep me company, an' show yer don't hold no malice. Ain't I right, boys? All tergether now—an' hyar's ter better 'quaintance. Down she goes."

There was no getting around it when he put it in that way, and every man lifted his filled glass to his lips, while Kate Chase followed the movement with her own glass, though she still covered the heart of Snapshot Sam with her unerring aim.

And without the least hesitation he threw back his head, raised the glass to his lips, and then set it down on the bar—empty.

CHAPTER III.

ANGELS' FLAT GOES GUNNING.

WHERE did it go to? If an affidavit had been required of the men of Angels' Flat they would one and all have testified that it had gone down the throat of Snapshot Sam.

Only Rustling Kate had a different idea. She had watched the composition of the mixture, in spite of the close attention she felt that the little stranger required, and she knew to a positive certainty that no man living, who was not too fuddled by drink to know that he had a throat and a stomach, would be able to swallow it, much less lean forward with such a smile of satisfaction on his face, and quietly remark:

"We've drinked together, an' we've jawed together—reckon it's 'bout time ter shake an' call it squar'. When Snapshot Sam puts down a dose like that it's 'cause he's in a box whar he'd sooner drink than shoot. Ther boys hez all stood by like lam's, an' all thet's wantin' now are fur to say, 'shake, pard,' an' I'll feel meself a reg'lar Angel."

"There is one thing more that we can do, and that is shoot together. I thought that drink of Pete's might bring you around to that, but I see that I was mistaken in the amount of sand you carry. Is there anything else that I can suggest for an excuse, so that I won't have to shoot you down in cold blood?"

A good bit of the smile had gone out of the woman's face now, and the bystanders began to see a little further into the game. If her course meant anything especial it was that she was after this man from the outset, and had wanted something more than the justification that is accorded an ordinary fracas with shooting-irons before she carried out her intention of shooting him down.

"That wouldn't be no fair shake, nohow; an' ef yer knowed me a leetle better you'd say ther same. Why, bless yer soul, whar they know me they call me by ther name ov ther 'Pistol Sharp,' an' some on 'em thinks I travel on nothin' else. I ain't one ov those bad men hungerin' fur a row; but when ther ball are actooally open I kin take keer ov me head ez long ez thar's nothin' ter stop me. But I opine thar would be a gener'l pilin' on ef I took advantage ov yer youth an' innocence, an' ef I waited till yer had a square shot I might find meself a-sailin' up ther flume. Do yer want ter slay me very bad?"

"I don't care who you say you are, I mean to kill you. After the insult that you put on me by your address I might have shot you down and no one would have questioned my right to do so, but I am willing to give you at least a seeming chance for your life, woman though I am."

"You'll shoot an' I'll kick. That's 'bout ther style ov fair play a woman likes ter see."

The sneering tones of the man had their effect; still, to the surprise of the bystanders, who had continued strictly neutral, and had not offered the first suggestion since Kate Chase took the matter up in such deadly earnest, she forbore to pull the trigger, though the derringer still covered the heart of the man from that indefinite location he had named as "Way-down."

"I have offered you the chance to defend yourself like a man; will nothing tempt you to draw, or are you all wind and no weapons? Your time is getting very near its end."

"An' about how soon do yer want me ter begin?"

"Now—at once; as soon as you can draw!" she exclaimed, madly.

"Thar yer hev it then; an' you gentlemen will allow it war a square deal, 'thout a flyer?" and the Pistol Sport, raising his hat, half bowed, as if in apology for having had to thus treat a woman.

For a little while the sympathies of the crowd had been rather with the stranger, but what accompanied his speech put them all the other way.

It was done so quickly that no one could say exactly how it was done, but as he spoke, although no one had seen his hand move, there had been a little shoot of flame and a suppressed cry from the woman, who had just enough remaining consciousness to pull trigger. Then she dropped motionless and apparently lifeless to the floor.

It was very neatly done, and if his antagonist had not been a woman, the pilgrims at the Best Chance would have thenceforth been willing to swear by the Pistol Sharp who had so deftly proved his claim to the title.

But a woman?

Rustling Kate had a record, of course, and all that, and if it had been a tenderfoot she had been playing with, and had finally sent over the range, the indignation of the crowd would possibly have been hot against her, even though it was a kind of game that they themselves delighted to play upon occasion.

But this, to their surprise, had worked the other way; and after the marvelous quickness with which he caught the drop from her, it was plain that he was no slouch, but a pistol expert of the most approved type. As such it was an outrage for him to have drawn the woman on by his seeming complaisance. It would have been more the thing for him to have eaten sand to the fullness of his capacity and then taken it out of some one else at the first opportunity.

All this P'ison Pete and his customers thought of in the moment of hush that followed the double report, and in spite of what the woman had said, and all they had laid back for Johnny Chase, each saw his duty in the same way, and every hand went down for a weapon at the same instant, while the voice of Snapshot Sam was heard speaking:

"Don't crowd ther mourners till yer see ef ther's a corpse in ther box. I ain't ther sport ez would hurt a lady; an' ef I war, Johnny Chase are big enuf ter settle with me. She came agunnin' fur me, an' ez ther crowd gi'n me fair play while she war settin' up her game, I don't want ter go fur it. Jest hold on an' she'll be 'round fur slaughter in a minnit, an' you kin tell her I've hauled off ter repair damages, but 'll see her later. So long! I'll call ag'in."

There was plenty of time for shooting, but they couldn't resist the desire to listen to what he had to say, and then it was too late.

As he closed he gave a reckless little laugh, threw himself suddenly backward, his heels up, and, his hands first resting on a bench that was convenient, with a skill that could only belong to a practiced athlete, he threw a back hand-spring fairly through the window behind him.

At that the spell was broken, and the crowd made a rush for the door. As the attendance at the Best Chance happened to be slimmer than usual there were not more than a dozen collisions, nor more than half as many premature discharges of the revolvers that every man to the last was flourishing.

Once outside they caught sight of a dark figure running down the road with a deer-like speed, and without a moment's hesitation every hand went up and there was a simultaneous discharge of firearms that sounded like a fire by company.

The running figure halted, threw up its arms, and then fell in a heap just as the up stage came rolling along and halted where he fell.

And the sharp rattle had scarcely died away when a man sprung from the semi-darkness.

"Here, what's been going on?" he asked sternly. "Somebody came whooping down to tell me that Pete had opened out a big circus with a dozen side-shows thrown in, and that they wanted me bad to regulate the audience. What's the matter? Say it quick, for the bank has just opened out for the evening, and I haven't time to tarry."

A chorus of shouts greeted his appearance, for the man was Johnny Chase himself, who bounded into the hostile camp as though he didn't know that his words were almost an insult, and that the men there were already thirsting for his blood. He was well enough aware

that in this section of the camp there were men who were willing enough to slaughter him if they dared; yet he rather guessed he would not dare to try, and if they did, he was ready for them with any weapons they might choose to name, and he went among them as fearlessly as though they were his own peculiar allies.

And at the Flat, or anywhere else, it would have been hard to find a man who looked more as though he could take care of himself.

He was above rather than under the medium size, but so thoroughly proportioned that he seemed to be a very much smaller man than he was, and it was from that that he obtained the diminutive Johnny. Seen by daylight, his features were as regular and clear-cut as a woman's, and his eyes—a soft seal-brown—had a kindly look in them that had befuddled more than one man a moment before the shot came that caused his death. He was neatly dressed in a gray suit that suited his splendid form with wonderful exactness, and his feet were shod with gaiters that contrasted strangely with the heavy stogies of the men around him.

Of weapons there was no sign, and it was even possible that he had none about him, though it was never safe to gamble on Johnny Chase not being heeled. It was a notorious fact that he carried his pistols or not, just as the fancy struck him; but several of the Flat's most esteemed chieftains had slipped up on taking their chances of his having left his tools at home, and since then there was a disinclination to meddle with him, heeled or not. In either shape, he was so horrible a man to handle.

As the confused medley that greeted him was perfectly unintelligible, he raised his hand with a gesture that could not be mistaken, and just as utter silence followed, Poison Pete came to the door.

"Well, Johnny, you kin take my straps if we haven't had a chief here that's fooled us twice over. The madame said it was her lay-out, so we didn't chip till we thought she'd gone up the flume. Then, when we did, we were fooled ag'in. It war ther neatest thing out, ef it had been done with somebody that looked a leetle tougher; but she's all right, an'll be out in a minnit, an' sez we must let ther sharp go till she hez time ter put in her bill. Mebbe you'd better come in an' cheer her up a leetle; I tell you, she dropped mighty sudden."

"What in red lightning are you after now? Has Kate anything to do with this circus?"

"A heap to do; an' when we found that the lone hand wouldn't win we jist threw him cold. He's layin' out thar now, an' ef yer want ter gether in ther pieces, he won't git away till ye pick 'em all up."

Johnny listened to this interruption of a bystander in a bewildered sort of way, and then looked up at Pete for explanation.

"The fact are, Johnny, she took a bigger track than she could carry, an' ther peelgrim—which the same are a strange gerloot ez slings 'round Snapshot Sam ez his handle—stole ther drop, an' creased her neat ez yer please. She's comin' to, now, an' ef yer wants ter see her you'll find her inside."

Without waiting for further explanation, Johnny Chase bounded through the door.

CHAPTER IV.

BLUE-NOSE BOBBY.

SLIM JIMMY came in from the north, Fat Johnny came in from the south; and when they were both on time they passed each other at Angels Flat.

On this particular evening Fat Jack was an hour behind time and hustled along his steeds pretty lively as he saw the lights of the Flat glimmering in the distance before him.

He had just two passengers left; and as they approached the town the elder was saying:

"I'll tell yer what yer want, mister, an' then you kin take it er leave it, jist ez yer hez a mind to. It's a pard ter tie to—a real bad man on wheels. An' fur sich a man yer don't hev ter look no funder. I'm hyar—Plumb Center Pete, ther bad man abroad. Ef yer think you kin hold yer end up don't look nowhar else, but put it right thar, pard, put it right thar, and when we strike ther Flat we'll show 'em a holy circus."

The speaker was Pete Blockey, otherwise and more generally known as Plumb Center Pete. His address has already given a fair description of his mental and moral qualifications, and as for his personal peculiarities, they were such as naturally belonged to such a personage. He was tall, stoutly built, with a keen black eye, a battered-looking face, a tough-looking costume, and an arsenal of weapons at his waist.

If he talked loud it was no sign that he was a blower; and public opinion, wherever expressed, made him out to be a "better" man than his own say so.

The individual to whom his remarks were addressed was as strong a contrast as could well be imagined.

He was a little man scarcely reaching to the chin of the other, and his face had a mild look of wonderment on it that Plumb Center Pete had rather counted on, and which he certainly enjoyed.

The two had happened together in the stage;

and as Pete was inquisitive, and the young man almost confidential, the conversation gradually led up to the foregoing outburst.

"Thank you, my friend, for the offer; but would not that make me too conspicuous? I would prefer entering Angels Flat quietly, and in a way that would give offense to no one."

"Eggs-zackly! Ef yer want ter come that way this ain't percisely ther right kind ov a hearse. I never *did* know 'em ter fool much 'round a corpse."

"Oh, you make the camp worse than it is. If I come in quietly, willfully tramp on nobody's toes and strictly attend to my own business, the moral sense of the community ought to protect me, at least till my intentions develop."

"Kerrect you be. Thar ain't a squarer town this side ov ther head-waters ov Bitter Krick."

Ef anybody shoots at you they'll let yer shoot back till yer tired; an' ef ther aforesaid bad men gits away with yer baggage, they'll lay out yer stiff free ov charge, an' throw in a stone box; but what good 's that a-doin' you? Ef one ov them roarin' lions comes your way I'm afear'd it'll be all up. Still, ef yer wants ter reesk it ye'r welcome. Plumb Center Pete don't often make sech offers, an' you kin bet he don't insist."

"And you think my life would really be in danger if I offered to pursue my investigations there?"

"Jest go an' try it, go and try it. Ef they don't meet yer outside it'll be a wonder. They ain't no fools down thar, an' I'll bet they're aware ye'r comin'."

"But how would they know it? I have not spoken to a living soul of my intentions, and as far as I know there is not a living soul acquainted with them."

"You're sharp. Ther's ernuf. Go in an' win. Plumb Center Pete ain't 'nother word ter say. Ther friends 'll meet at ther house, say, 'bout ter-morrer evenin', an' ef thar's ary a Gospel sharp in ther place, give yer a good send-off."

"And you really think I will be in personal danger there?"

"Don't think 'bout it at all, *know* it. I've gi'n yer warnin' 'cause I liked yer looks, an' it's a shame fur a young man like you ter be 'lowed ter go fur Angels Flat without bein' perpared fur what's goin' ter happen."

"And what good do you think you could do? If the place is so solid against me it seems that a man more or less would not make much difference. They could murder two of us about as well as one."

"Pends a heap on which that one are. Ef it's Pete Blockey yer needn't worry yerself about what's goin' ter happen to *him*. He kin paddle his own canoe whether he's alone er got a passenger. Now, what's it ter be? Speak quick so ez I'll know what ter be doin' when ther stage stops."

"Then we are almost there?"

"Purty nigh ter almost, but that's ther same thing. Der yer want ter take me er leave me? Say that much quick. Ther rest kin keep."

"Then I will take you," answered the young man suddenly. "I can ill aford to invest much money in what may be a wild goose chase, but if I find out that your suggestions turn out to be the truth you sha'n't suffer; you sha'n't suffer."

"Good ernuf. Oh, I jest knew there'd be fun afloat when I mounted this hyar stage. We'll keep it kinder to ourselves, an' see what's ther stren'th ov ther game. Ef they go fur yer hot an' heavy we'll know that they've dropped to yer leetle lay-out, an' we'll govern ourselves accordingly."

"But meantime, something might happen to me. That would break the combination."

"Combination's a good word. It's your box, lay-out an' chips but Plumb Center Pete pulls ther keards. Good ernuf. Now, young man, what's yer name?"

The question was an abrupt one, but perfectly natural. So far Plumb Center Pete had not heard the name, though he had announced his own quite freely.

"Ernest Roget," was the answer, given without a shade of hesitation.

"Frenchy, but not bad. Kinder 'spectable like. Shoot it off ez often ez yer gits a chance, an' I'll lay back an' see how they take it. Hyer we be, safe at ther Flat, an' ther fun begins. We jist got through in time."

As he spoke the stage stopped, and at the very instant it drew up it seemed that pandemonium and all had broken loose outside. There was an orchestra of yells and a fusilade of fire-arms as though a whole regiment was trying to get in its work.

Half a dozen bullets managed to hit the coach.

For men that didn't generally throw lead away that was a sign that there was something in that direction, and without hesitation or regard to danger, Ernest Roget thrust his head out through the upper part of the stage door on his side, and took a view of the situation.

Right under the wheels of the coach a man lay gasping. He seemed badly hurt, and it was certain that a slight movement one way or the other would grind his face into the sand.

Roget was not accustomed to such sights, if his

actions went for any evidence. Here he was, desiring to make his entry into the camp with as little flourish of trumpets as possible, and knowing nothing of the rights of the case except that the whole of the town were after the man that was down. Common sense would have said, let him alone.

Nevertheless he did nothing of the kind.

So quick that Blockey had no time to observe what he was after, Ernest Roget dashed open the door of the coach, sprung to the ground, and dragged the man out from his dangerous position and began examining his hurts, just as the horses, frightened or hurt, gave a wild plunge, dragging the stage right over the spot where the man had been lying.

Pretty badly hurt he seemed to be, though nothing necessarily fatal. The blood was oozing out at several places, but he essayed feebly to rise to his feet.

"What is the matter with you, man? what have you been doing?"

A better man than Roget might have asked these questions as nervously. To all appearance he had got hold of an unpopular man, and he wanted to see whether by any chance duty and humanity required him to hold on to him and back his game.

"I ain't been a-doin' nothin'," responded the lips that were still a little white, though strength was beginning to come back.

"I war jest a-peekin' in ter see what war the game at the Best Chance, when ther door opened an' ther hull gang out an' let drive. Oh, I'm shot all ter pieces!"

"Pears ter me yer talk mighty strong fur a dead man. Git up hyar, an' let's see what's the matter."

Plumb Center Pete had reached the side of the wounded man by this time, and there wasn't a bit of sentiment about him to interfere with his judgment, so that he detected a strength about the voice that satisfied him that no great shock or harm had been done.

"Double dast ye!" retorted the victim, breaking into a lugubrious whine, "can't yer lemme die in peace? Mebbe ef they knowed how bad I war hurt, they wouldn't shoot ag'in. Oh, they're comin', an' ef ye'r half a man you'll tell 'em not ter shoot. 'Deed I didn't mean nothin'; 'pon me soul ter glory I didn't. Oh-h-h!"

The wounded man squirmed around onto his knees, clasped his hands in front of him, and uttered a long-drawn howl, that was answered by a roar of laughter from the dozen men that came dashing up.

"Ha, ha, boys! You've fired at the pigeon an' hit ther crow; this hyar are on'y old Bobby Blue-nose. Keep it up a bit longer, an' yer may shoot some sense inter him. I sw'ar, he begins ter talk a leetle more like a reasonable human crittur."

There was something so ludicrous in having mistaken this fellow for a chief in camp, that Snap-shot Sam was almost forgotten; and as Pete Blockey caught him by the scruff of the neck and raised him to his feet, with an ease that showed his own tremendous strength to good advantage, they crowded around, more amused than anxious.

Bobby Blue-nose was considered to be the biggest fool as well as the most disreputable individual the Flat could boast of. Whence he came had never transpired; and according to common repute, he scarcely had sense enough to know or tell.

He had been about the camp for at least six months. At first he had been moderately successful in wringing in for drinks; and in some way attracted by his simple manners, the miners had cheerfully shared their grub with him, when he happened to be lingering around at meal-time.

All that had played out some time ago. When it was discovered that pistols wouldn't drive him to work, and that he would about as soon be kicked as petted, they took less interest in him, and warned him off whenever he was caught hanging around. How he lived no one knew or cared. A man "without sand or soap," they just gave him a kick and a curse, when he happened to be in the way, and thought no more about him.

"Hyar's yer chief! Say, Bobby, did it hurt? Come right in an' we'll git Pete ter fix yer up a drink like he made fur ther Pistol Sharp. It'll open yer eyes wide, an' mebbe yer kin tell us which way he went. Dog-gone ye, ef yer hedn't bin a-slinkin' 'round, we'd 'a' had him."

One of the bystanders began with chaff, though he ended with angry earnest, as he thought of what might have been.

Some of the others took a different view of it, however, though without feeling any the kindlier toward Bobby.

"Ef that's ez straight ez ther boys ov ther Flat kin sling lead," interposed one, "they hed better shut up shop. Why, dog-gone it, thar war twenty shots fired, and he wasn't hit once."

"Oh, ye'r mistooked thar," put in Bobby, gathering courage as he began to see that there had been a mistake. "'Deed, I'm all shot ter pieces, an' I don't b'leve I c'd even hold whisky. Can't somebody try me an' see?"

"You ain't hurt," responded Blockey, as no

one else seemed to give much attention to what the man was saying.

"Ther bark's rubbed off'n couple places, an' I jest guess ther rest are all skeer. Come 'long, I'll set 'em up meself, fur I'm dry ez a fish; an' then you kin slide out. I reckon ther Flat don't hev much use fer you."

Pete had given a covert glance around, and seen that his lately made pard had disappeared in the confusion, and in that way covering his retreat he led the procession into the Best Chance.

CHAPTER V.

A BIG GAME OPENS AT THE SAINT'S REST.

THERE did not seem to be a particle of use in trying to find Snapshot Sam, since he had a good five minutes' start. The general opinion was that when he lost his sand under the peculiar circumstances in which he was placed he jumped the camp for good. As the crowd at Poison Pete's did not generally exert itself without an immediate object in view, and as those who had been attracted to the spot were more anxious for further particulars than anything else, everybody went into the saloon to give the occurrence more thorough discussion, and see what John Chase might have to say.

They were all doomed to disappointment as regards the latter. Kate Chase had come to her senses fully in the interim, and she and her husband had quietly departed without even leaving a "thank you" for those who had been so willing to take a hand after the game had opened.

"No use, boys; the Rustler left while you war chinnin' round Blue-nose Bobby out thar; an' ef yer wants her view ov ther matter yer only hold are ter go to ther Saint's Rest, blow in a few cases, an' see what yer kin pick up. Ther fun's over hyar, an' mighty glad be I thet it ain't no wuss. If ther racket hed bin goin' on when Johnny 'rived he'd 'a' cleaned things upside down. But ther stranger war a bu'ster, an' no mistakes."

"But, who war he, an' what did he look like," inquired Plumb Center Pete, a little anxiously.

"We've on'y got his word fur it, an' he said his handle was 'Snapshot Sam, ther Pistol Sharp.' Ez fur what he looked like—blame me, ef I know."

Poison Pete looked around inquiringly, and half a dozen, whose eyes happened to meet his, shook their heads solemnly, as they tried in vain to think of a description.

"He war a leetle, no-'count lookin' feller, purty well bundled up fur ther time ov ther year; but I didn't see much ov him, 'cept his eyes. They war sharp, an' that's a fact. It's a pity we didn't look closter, fur we won't be like ter see much ov him ag'in. Johnny Chase'll be gunnin' fur him ef he shows his nose nigh ther string; an' he's heard ov him, an' knows enough ter git in outen ther wet when it rains."

"And who's Johnny Chase?"

Pete Blockey was in search of information; and the other Pete was not slow about giving it to him. He gave a hasty sketch of the different characters in which Chase had posed since he and his wife had struck the burg, gambler, desperado, and mining expert, as willing to blossom out in one character as another, and a success at all of them. He was at present interested in several mines, including the Big Hope; and at the same time was proprietor of the Saint's Rest gambling hole, where more money lay fur the turn of the cards than in any other saloon in all that region.

"Purty good sorter citizen that; an' ther kind I like ter meet. I tell yer, when I h'iste in a leetle grub I think I'll interview ther gamey leetle sport myself. Ef you fellers are ripe fur fun, call round in half an hour er so, an' you'll see me copper on ther tray. That's my first bet every time."

As Blockey went out of the door, intending to find his way to the other end of the building, he felt a little pull at his elbow, and looking down, he saw Bobby Blue-nose.

"Say, pard," the creature mumbled, in a low tone, "you treated me white, an' I want ter give yer a tip. He's a mighty good man, but don't yer chip in on his game, don't yer chip in. 'Cos why—when ther time kims, Bobby'll be 'round, Bobby'll be 'round."

"Who d'yer mean, ole man? Thar's several good men, an' able fur any ov 'em, are Plumb Center Pete."

"Never mind that. Jest don't chip in. Thar'll be blud on ther moon when Bobby gits a good ready, an' don't yer furgit it. I jest thort I'd tell yer. An' yer pard's in at Sammy Sanders's. Find him an' stay thar. This ain't your circus, an' don't you chip in."

With this warning, so indefinite, though intended to be impressive, but which, to a man like Blockey, appeared to be comical, Bobby disappeared, while Plumb Center Pete went on to the opposite end of the building, where, as Blue-nose had said, he found Ernest Roget.

"Good fur you, ole boy! Glad ter see you ain't howlin' fur publick 'tention. Pack down yer grub ez fur ez you hold, an' then go ter sleep on it. I reckon you kin climb a chimney ez fur ez ther next man, but you ain't wanted on ther

war-path ter-night. I think you made a good strike when you took hold of that bummer. He might be a wuss man, an' he's comin' your way when he gits a chance. Work him fur what he's worth."

"What under the sun has he to do with the matter? I judged there had been a mistake on him, and that nobody thought he was worth slinging lead at. Is he one of their bad men here?"

"Sca'ssly; but them's ther kind ov gerloots ez knows a heap ef yer kin git 'em ter open the'r mouths—an' this one'll talk to you 'thout much urg'in ef he hez ther chance. You hit him whar he lives, an' he'd do a heap fur yer jest fur spite."

Without making his meaning any clearer Pete found the lay of their accommodations, hurried through his supper, and started for the Saint's Rest alone. The directions given him were scarcely necessary, since instinct took him right along to where a blaze of light and a hum of voices, issuing from a more pretentious building than the most, called his attention to the gilded sign announcing the place he was in search of.

He entered without hesitation. Though a stranger in the town he had obtained some points in advance, and knew the place and its inhabitants well by reputation. He stepped through the door with all the confidence of an old inhabitant, and found himself in a crowd such as he had hardly expected to see in a town of the apparent size of this.

The work was going on at the usual rapid rate, and if Chase wasn't coining money at the Saint's Rest it was not because he didn't have the custom. Perhaps there was some reason in the coolness that Poison Pete evinced toward the family. The best custom was all here, though a few of the old friends of Pete did not desert him entirely, and the rougher class, who were hardly presentable in the gilded parlor of the Rest, stuck to the old headquarters closely enough; but the Rest had the cream of the customers. That was where money changed hands; and that was where the money went to.

If the little affair at the Best Chance was known here no one was speaking about it, and when Blockey entered, Johnny Chase was talking quietly to a hard-featured person, who looked as though he might be a Scotchman, and a man of respectability; at least he had the steadiest look of any man in the room.

As Plumb Center Pete looked he listened. Three young men were standing near him conversing in a low tone.

"What in the name of wrath has Johnny got to say to Elder McKinzie, that is so interesting? I've been waiting an hour on him, and now that he's come I can't get a chance at him till the Scotchman closes his sermon. Say, Sid, can't you chuck the old canter out of the window?"

"Don't ask fool questions. Of course I can't. If the elder wants to have his talk out he'll do it; and Johnny would sit down on the first fellow that interfered. Possess your soul in patience, man, and you'll come out all the better in the end. I wonder where the madame is to-night. She hasn't been around."

"Whist!" said the third, a short stout young fellow with a jovial face, and more than the suspicion of a brogue. "Sure, I saw her come in wid Johnny half an hour ago, an' she'll be on deck purty soon, but don't be howlin' her name out all over creation. If he hears you he may stare at you, wid a pistol in his hand, an' that's mighty unhealthy ef ther head-boards in ther graveyard don't lie."

"Yes, fur a little man he does foot up a mighty big record, and I've noticed the Rustler elected about every man fur a place on the list. But all the same, if they are going to open the box to-night I wish they would hurry it up a little before my luck gets clean done up. I feel it in me that I could hit 'em hard as long as it's my turn on."

"Don't be anxious. It's bad luck to win at Johnny's—something always happens to the man that does. I believe I would sooner drop a case in now and then than be the man that scooped the bank. I've always counted on a long life, and I'd prefer not running any risks. Not that the old man isn't square enough; but somehow the luck comes in one way if it don't another."

"Well, howld yer whist anyhow. There's the madame herself, an' ef the bank don't open now yez won't have a chance at it to-night."

The three spoke carelessly enough, but Blockey caught the undertone of earnestness that was in what they said, and made a note of it. There were numerous sides to John Chase; and here was a suggestion that he had not yet heard. He jotted it down in his mind for future reference, and looked about for the madame.

She made her appearance through a doorway that led to an adjacent house; and came as coolly as though there had been no little circus at Poison Pete's, in which she had come out second best.

She halted at John Chase's side a moment, and said a few words to him in a low tone. Then she glided along through the crowd, with a nod here and there, and took her position in the second room behind the table on which was

spread the lay-out. At the Saint's Rest, when the social weather was fair and money was plenty, Kate Chase handled the box with a grace peculiarly her own; and generally with a luck that was extraordinary.

There were a good many people who cared little for gambling who nevertheless thought it was not a half bad thing that Johnny Chase was running things at Angels' Flat. Now and then there was a vicious outbreak, of course; but, as a general thing, the manners of the town were twenty per cent. better than they had been. There was plenty of drinking and playing, but it got to be done in a deadly smooth way that made the town look quite civilized.

Pete Blockey having heard of this blissful state of affairs, kept—for him—remarkably quiet, watching the proceeding with interest; and especially the three young men whose conversation he had by the merest chance overheard. He even quietly asked a question or two; and got about all the information that was possible, at the very first effort.

The three were comparative strangers to the place, and, up to the time of their arrival there, quite possibly strangers to each other. Their names were Sidney Dare, Will Kempton and Ed Cahill. All were so well dressed, and so quiet about themselves, that the camp put them down at once as gamblers. The latter indeed had talked enough to show that he was an Irishman, with a rattling tongue; but beyond that his seemingly indiscreet nature had not carried him. All three had plenty of money, and were to be found at the Saint's Rest of evenings; when they occasionally held mild discussions with the tiger; but more often turned their attention to short cards. With other things they had remarkable luck, but among themselves it seemed to be very evenly balanced, while so far the chief result of their efforts had been to establish a friendship that made Johnny Chase once remark that they were getting too thick to thrive. To-night the little gambler watched them keenly as they moved up to the table, each procuring a small stack of checks.

"It's a dollar I'm investin' on the quane," remarked Cahill, lightly. "I'd just as soon make it a thousand, but thin it wouldn't last as long."

"Wrong, as usual," laughed Kempton, "and here's money that says so. I shall place my dollar right alongside of yours, with a copper on the top. You don't mind it, do you, old boy?"

"Mind it? Not a bit av it. If you can't win, I won't lose, an' nather av us will hurt the bank very bad."

Both looked at Mrs. Chase, to see what view of their proceedings might be taken by her.

There was a scornful smile on her lips; but for which—or for both—she did not say, and they asked no questions, as for a time the cards slipped regularly from the box, and the other bettors made their game in the intervals.

The betting was not, as yet, very heavy, and Plumb Center Pete was just beginning to decide in his own mind that the Saint's Rest didn't amount to so much, after all, when he noticed a new-comer edging his way into the crowd.

"Thar's ole biz at last," was Pete's mental exclamation. "Ef he don't mean war from the word go, I don't know gunpowder when I see it. 'Pears ter be a stranger in ther camp, an' I wouldn't wonder ef he war a bad man on wheels."

Blockey was not far wrong in his conjectures. The man drew from his breast-pocket a huge wad of money, and selecting the first bill that came to hand, fluttered it down on the table with a careless swing.

It dropped squarely on the ten.

"Good enough! Stay there, old hoss! I've heard that this game runs with a squar' deal, an' ez I've come hyar ter size it, you'll pull ther cards 'thout monkeyin' round with chips. I'm Snapshot Sam, frum 'way-down, an' I know ther keyards by name."

CHAPTER VI.

THE LAST TURN.

PLUMB CENTER PETE gave utterance to a low but distinctly audible whistle as he heard the announcement, and then cast a sharp, quick glance at Johnny Chase and his spouse, to see how they took it.

Not a muscle moved in either face, though the name must have been familiar enough; and Blockey scratched his head thoughtfully. He hardly understood how thoroughly the Saint's Rest was run on the principle of never starting a row; and always ending one that any one else began. Kate Chase simply nodded, and, after a glance around to see if there were any others who wanted to follow suit, began to pull the cards as smoothly as ever.

"Good ernuf fer Johnny," was Pete's mental commentary. "I wouldn't 'a' thunk it. He's a badder man than the most; an' he's bound ter hev that boodle fu'st, an' a scalp arterwards. It's safe ter be 'round while ther pile holds out, but when that gits low, look out fer a jamboree. Wonder w'ich side I'd better back; er ef I'd jest better slosh 'round permisc'us? I'll hol' on an' see. He kim in fur ter kick up a row, an' it's safe ter bet he won't be disap'inted."

Snapshot Sam it was, of course, but he had

made some little change in his wardrobe, and was not nearly so offensive-looking as he had appeared a little before, when lounging at the Best Chance. He did not seem at all concerned about the fate of his money, for he was looking carelessly around, taking in the audience with a pair of twinkling eyes that were too sharp to let one man escape.

"It ain't big ernuf stake ter 'spring' ther keyards fur," thought Pete, "but ef it war I wouldn't advise fur ter do it ef she can't win on ther square. He's watchin' out fur snags, and don't yer furgit it. Ah!"

The ten had just come out on the wrong side for the interests of the Pistol Sharp. The C vanished from his sight, and the game went on.

"That's squar", an' I don't squeal. I'm a-look-in' at yer, an' I ain't ther kind ter call fur a count. Try it ag'in. Thar's his brother, jest from ther same bank."

The wad of money came out once more, and another bill came fluttering down, without any apparent diminution of the roll, while the slender fingers at the box went steadily on with the deal.

"Lost ag'in, eh? Try it some more. Thar's nothin' like follerin' a lead till yer strike bed-rock er go bu'st."

"Sure, an' it looks loike you'd do that same last," muttered Cahill in an undertone, as for the third time the unlucky ten-spot lost.

"Never mind, honey, thar's more whar that come from. Hyar's another that says I can call the turn in the box. Ace, deuce an' ten fur a millyum."

Again the roll came out, and the money fluttered to its place, while the dealer held her hand a moment to give any one else a chance to talk.

"One fur nothin'," quoted Sam, as the ace came in sight.

"Two fur show; an' ten ter go!" he added in triumph, as the ace, slipping forward, revealed the deuce just below.

"Puts you a hundred ahead of the game," coolly remarked Johnny Chase, who stood at his wife's shoulder.

"A hundred, eh? Who's keerin' ter hurt his brains fer a hundred, guessin' at ther turn? Observe them figgers more jedgematic like, an' yer eyes'll diskriver a M on ther end. When yer pay out fer that four ter one I'll hev ter git a coffee sack ter kerry my coin."

Somehow it had been taken for granted that he was, as usual, betting the even hundred; but money talks at faro as well as everywhere else. All the same there was an excellent opening for a wrangle if the proprietor of the Saint's Rest had been of the wrangling kind.

Johnny responded, with a smile:

"I guess we'll have to grin and bear it, though the next time I'll be looking a little better out. The rule here is a limit of two hundred and fifty unless we mention differently when the game opens. The boys all know it, but if we had won I don't suppose you would have squealed, so we'll go ahead. The bank is good for several more turns."

"That's square ez you kin talk it, an' I won't disremember. Set 'em up ag'in. I'll try it some more. I'll make hay while ther sun shines, an' after that we kin jist go 'round and paint ther town red. There's the limit on the lucky ten; an' I'm open fur a side bet with ary pilgrim, up to ther biggest figger in my pile, thet the ten wins."

He stared around in search of an answer, leaving Mrs. Chase to shuffle the cards at her own good will and pleasure. It was a peculiar mark of confidence that materially enhanced the possibility of finding some one to accept the defiance, though Johnny shook his head gravely as the look rested on him.

"I might as well raise the flyer at once," he said, with a solemn smile. "Perhaps some of these gentlemen will meet you where you live. As a general thing you don't have to look very far for nerve and a man, at Angels."

"Right you are, Chase, and if the bank don't think I'm wringing in on its game, I'll take a look at that M he was flourishing a bit ago. I've jist got that much here to win or lose."

Sid Dare nodded pleasantly as he spoke, and held up a little packet of bills that looked as though it might cover the amount.

"Good enough," retorted Sam. "Hyar, mister man, these side bets are sometimes oncertain things. You hold the stakes."

Into the hands of Plumb Center Pete, who had by this time crowded into the front rank, he thrust the thousand-dollar bill.

"Jest ez well throw out an anker ter ther wind'ard. Ef I win, which ov course I will, hol' on ter those till to-morrer. Ef I don't call fur 'em then my exek'ter will, an' you kin turn 'em over ter him. All set, Johnny, let ther jenny whirl."

The game was getting to be interesting. Snapshot Sam did not look like an ordinary ruffian, and by this time some little hints about his character, and his record so far in the town began to fly around the room. After the usual course of such affairs there were already some who were almost willing to back the chances of his game, and declare themselves his admirer. If it had not been for the cold, impassive face of Johnny Chase, on the other side of the table, the

sentiment might have been more openly pronounced.

"Maybe you'd like to look at the box?" thoughtfully inquired the dealer, hesitating just as she was about to put the cards into their silver receptacle.

"Thankee, marm; but I don't see ez it would make a diffabitterence. I never see'd ther box I couldn't git a half dozen out ov at a time ef the game re-quired it. I'll trust ther honest looks an' a square deal. I know how it is meself."

He laughed as he spoke, and so killed any possible offense in his words. At least they were not noticed, and the deal went on.

The game had not been running long, but it began to look as though it was the stranger's night on. Two or three turns were made, and then out came the lucky ten, with a deuce behind it in the door.

"Oh, this are jest peaches an' cream," said Sam, as he pushed his bet over to the nine. "Not even a split; an' side bets enough ter gimme an overdivided eent'rest on the Bank ov Californy. Keep ther keyards a-moovin', an' I'll keep a-rakin' in ther stakes."

Such a run of luck had not set in at the Saint's Rest since the time it was opened. As many bets had perhaps been gathered in, but they were of a more moderate size as compared with the limit. The fact is, in faro the big bets are generally made when the bettor is in a recklessly bad vein of luck, while a winner is apt to play so cautiously that his streak don't count against what has gone before. That is a percentage in favor of the bank that is worth more than the splits, several times over.

Snapshot Sam was not troubling himself about caution. He just kept on piling up the limit, and as he won, though his face never lost its cheerful look, he had less to say. Pete Blockey, remembering the conversation that he had overheard, wondered what the outcome would be, and held on to the little fortune in his pocket with an idea that he had in some indefinite way committed himself to the stranger's game.

Sid Dare took his loss like a little man, though he evidently cared for no more of it. He watched the dealing with a critical eye, and nodded now and then when the winning card turned up. But Pete was not able yet to decide whether he was on the side of the bank; whether the bank had left him for the sure thing of eventually playing it out of Sam, or whether he was a possible ally in the future, who was now taking the measure of the dealer. When he heard him in a low tone remark to Cahill, "Such a run of luck beats all creation. Another win and the bank will close for the night," he was more uncertain than ever, though Cahill's answer set him thinking.

"Do yez moind what wor said a bit ago? Sure, an' afther ther music ther circus opens. Stand a leetle out, whin ther racket begins. It's a funeral we'll be havin' in ther mornin'."

"Bank is closed, gentlemen," said Chase, as the card on which Sam had a moment before deposited his money turned up on the winning side.

"Sorry to spoil fun, but it's the rule of our game, as you all know, and the only percentage we have to break our luck when the game runs too strong the other way. We will be on hand for you to-morrow night, and hope to see this gentleman among the mourners, if he's still in condition to be on deck."

He waved his hand toward Sam, and then occurred a remarkable thing, such as had never happened before to any of the few heavy winners at the Saint's Rest.

Right under Sam's feet a trap-door suddenly opened, he threw up his hands, clutching wildly at the side, and then went through the floor. The trap flew back to its place, and for a moment there was a hush of horrified astonishment as the bystanders took in all the implications of the strange disappearance.

CHAPTER VII.

BOBBY GETS A DRINK TOO MUCH.

"Wal, I swar! I've seen that dodge tried in Frisco in a snap game, but I'll be dog-goned ef I thort it could be risked hyar. What sort ov a place is this, anyhow?"

Pete Blockey was not very careful about keeping his criticism to himself, either. He was a stranger in the place, and had made no bets, so there were two reasons why he should not come to the front; but he had to have his say anyhow, and his hand dropped down for his revolver in a way that showed he was willing to follow suit if some one gave him the right sort of a lead, and he stared around to see if it wasn't going to come.

Really, the saints were struck all in a heap, and couldn't believe the evidences of their own senses. If what they saw went for anything, Johnny Chase had reached a pitch of desperation that was next thing to insanity. Certainly he could not imagine that the people of Angels' Flat would allow him to run a game like this. Winners at the Rest were not very frequent, and that he should think that he could tumble them through a trap with impunity and rob them at his leisure, was too wild for any use. The first thought of every one was that Snapshot Sam must be rescued at any risk, and if

Blockey had moved as he spoke he would have had a big crowd at his back.

But Pete hesitated a moment, and then he got his answer from Ed Cahill that almost put another face on it.

"Whist, me darlints," laughed the Irishman in a careless tone. "Don't be afther makin' fools av yersilves. Sure, an' it's jist a capper fur ther bank he wor, a-showin' av yez all how the thing moight have been done."

The suggestion hit the crowd in its domicile, and would have been followed by a general laugh had not Chase himself broken its force.

"Hold hard there! None of that! I don't want it to be said that even in fun would I set up a gouge game at the Saint's Rest. There's some outside hand at work here and I'll know the bed rock truth before I'm done with him. The man that says that I touched the spring, or had it touched, or knew of its existence, settles with me right here and now. Is there any one here that wants to open the pot when they know the size of my hand?"

His fingers fell to his weapons, and he glared around with a look that was never seen on his face, save when he was about to go into business or on the war-path; while Kate taking a backward step, looked coolly around, as if in search of some doubting glance.

"But while we's a-chinnin' nobody knows what's goin' on down below. Nobody thinks ez ther' would be ary gouge hyar, but ef thar's a accerdent—which it's plain she are—there's no tellin' how bad she are, an' we'd better be flyin' round lively, an' seein' what we kin do fur ther victim. Which are ther nighest way to ther cellar, Johnny?"

There was plenty of sense in Pete's suggestion, and from the way it was received Chase knew that he must either fight or decide to fight the town. Perhaps he would just as soon have done that if he had been in one of his reckless moods; but the wiser course was to accept the suggestion, which he did, somewhat to the surprise of some of those who were watching him.

"I tell you, boys, it's only a flam of some kind, though how they got in their work I can't see. The man ain't hurt, and I would be willin' to bet a little he has slid out of reach long ago. This way! It beats me altogether; and I'll get to the bottom of it or fill up a hole."

It looked as if, now that the anger of his first surprise was past, he was becoming puzzled over the thing that had happened. Anyway, it was going to put him in bad odor with the camp—since it would be hard to make the boys believe that he did not know of the existence of the trap. And if he did—what was it there for? Of course he was the chief of Angels, and all that; but chiefs themselves must look out that they don't cause a mutiny. It was a crowd that was nervous from more reasons than one, that followed Johnny Chase to the little, seldom used, and rickety stairway.

Utterly fearless Chase strode in the advance, carrying a lamp.

The Rest was, leaving out of account the stage station, with its adjuncts, the largest building in town, and it was nothing wonderful that it should have a cellar under it, though there were not many in the place. Everybody looked curiously around, half expecting to see the stranger dead on the floor.

Instead of that there were no traces of him. The cellar was a long and moderately deep one. In one end were some boxes and barrels, the property of Chase. The other end, under the spot, where Snapshot Sam had been standing, was entirely empty. The lamp, held high in air, showed the furthest corner in that direction; and nothing in it.

"If it was an accident," muttered Chase, "the man hasn't broken his neck, anyhow."

There was some consolation in that; but as there was no visible means of egress in that side all eyes naturally turned toward the other; and just then their ears were greeted with a sound that came bursting out from the shadows, and made half a dozen hands dive for weapons.

Was it a groan; or was it a roar? Those who heard it could not say, and felt like making themselves ready for the worst in either case.

"By heavens! There's some one here!" exclaimed Sid Dare, pushing to the front. "Give me the lamp, Chase. We don't want to be left in sudden darkness if he upsets your apple-cart. The sound came from right over there—and there it is again."

Sure enough, while with one hand he took the lamp from Chase and with the other pointed in the direction of the barrels, the same sound fell upon their ears. In their present strained condition the spectators were almost as likely to run away as to investigate, and it was lucky for the solution of the mystery that Pete Blockey, who had no particular interest in anything, was there to go in front. He just marched up to the barrels and grabbed.

It was a man that he picked up off the floor, and as he stepped back toward the light every neck was craned anxiously forward.

"Wal, I'll be dawg gawned!"

Pete's ejaculation was long drawn and full of surprise, and as it came out he dropped his burden and looked up at the crowd.

"Dog blast my hide, ef it ain't ole Bobby

Blue-nose, w'ot I pulled outen a riot down at Poison Pete's shebang not an hour ago, an' drunk ez a lord. What in blazes are he doin' 'round hyar?"

Bobby came to the floor with a grunt. He was dropped as solidly as though he was a sack of potatoes, and the sound was perfectly involuntary; but the shock did him good. Slowly he brought himself up into a sitting posture and stared around him in an utterly dazed manner. If he ever had a grain of sense it did not look as though he had it now. He rubbed his eyes in a bewildered way, opened his mouth, and then was silent.

It was nothing new for Blue-nose Bobby to furnish amusement for the Flat, but to elicit such a genuine roar of laughter twice in the same evening was a new experience. He grinned in an idiotic sort of way, mumbled something that was utterly unintelligible, and then dropped solemnly backward and closed his eyes.

If the signs of the times could go for anything Bobby Blue-nose was about dead drunk.

Everybody but Johnny Chase recognized the great central fact at once. He was inclined to look for an explanation.

"See here, gentlemen, this begins to look more and more like my affair. How did this bummer, who has been starving around town so long that he begins to think he belongs here, get into my cellar?"

"By jest about ther same root thet ther other feller got out," was Plumb Center Pete's suggestion. "Looks ter me ez tho' he'd crawled in ter sample a whisky bar'l, an' hed hit her purty hefty."

"Drag him up here, and we'll have the truth out of him! He must at least have heard that man come through the trap, and which way he went afterward. He can tell or croak. It's my ranch he's breaking into."

"Thanks," retorted Blockey, "but I'm off duty at ther present time, an' I ain't doin' much draggin'. Ef yer wants ter kerry him yerself I guess ther crowd's willin', 'specially ez I kin report thet ther cellar door's on ther jar a leetle, an' all things favorable fur gittin' out er in. What I'd like ter know are how long's this thing been goin' on. Ef it are ther nateral run ov ervents I wouldn't mind livin' hyerabouts meself. A barrel of whisky, a tin dipper, an' a man holler ter his boots, an'—jewhilikens! what an ocean of heavenly bliss!"

The laugh was at Johnny Chase's expense, and the crowd was ready to take it. In fact, Chase was about the only really bloodthirsty soul left. As a reasonable explanation had been given of what seemed most likely to be a joke, it was accepted when Bobby appeared, to put a ludicrous face on the whole matter. To see the thing through to the end, three or four of the spectators made a dive for the prostrate man, and with some laughing and a good deal of pulling and hauling, carried him up-stairs, while Blockey, seeing his chance, laid a warning hand on Chase's arm.

"Give ther boyees a chance fur a leetle fun; an' swoop 'round after that Snapshot Sam at yer leisure. Yer jest missed hevin' a he ole jam-boree hyer ter-night; an' that hurts biz. Jest ez well thet Angels don't git up on its ear. Ye'll hev all ther better chance ter settle with Sam when he turns up ag'in. Ef yer make too much fuss over that pore ole bummer, they'll begin ter say thar may be suthin' in ther trap racket—an' you kin bet yer last duckit thet they won't none ov em keer ter buck ag'in' yer game, standing over that hole in ther floor."

"See here, I'm running this town—who are you?"

The sharply thrust question produced no particular effect on Blockey's nerves. He had a record of his own, and rather suspected that Johnny Chase had heard of it. He answered in his usual careless vein:

"Oh, I'm Plumb Center Pete, an' I jest struck town. It ain't nothin' ter me one side er t'other. I say it jest ez I see it, an' don't mean any offense. On'y, when yer puts ther last turn on ther screw, sometimes suthin' breaks."

"Right you are, old man," answered Chase with a sudden change of mood. "I'll kick Bobby out, set them up for the house, and start on a fresh deck. But I swear I'd like to understand why the cold one was wrung in. There's something somewhere, and we'll know it when the time arrives. But don't you be too fresh around here. For a stranger you have given a remarkable amount of good advice—take care it don't end up with a touch of the lead fever."

"Thankee, me lord; but I kerry ther patent, purgative, preventative pills, one fur a dose, six fur a gorge, an' ther box throwed in fur bad cases. Ef you an' me kin hit it off right, ther balance kin go ter grass, ez they will ef they fool 'round yours truly. Now, kin on. Thar's no tellin' what'll be goin' on up-stairs. When ther cat's away ther mice will frolic."

It looked as though Blockey had an eye toward setting up for a chief; but Johnny Chase had other business on hand, and overlooked the bantering tone.

"This way, first. I want to see how the old fraud did get in, and I don't know any one I'd sooner have around while I'm doing it."

Chase stepped off into the darkness with a

certainty born of his thorough knowledge of the place; and Pete followed with the usual confidence with which he went anywhere.

"A lovely place this would be to cut your throat. Eh?" laughed Johnny a moment later.

"Couldn't find a nicer, ef you war only sartin' what I'd be doin' while ther frolic war goin' on. Yer think I could ketch up with that Snapshot Sam afore he got clean through ther flume?"

"You're cool, anyhow; and you told the truth. The lock's off, and the door ready for lifting. The bummer came in and the bad man went out. I'd give a dollar to know where he is now."

"Save yer dollar ter put up that you'll see him ag'in. He won't stop at twice; an' frum all I kin hear, he's a thunderin' good sort ov man. Ah! you hear 'em. Thar he goes. Let's see what he looks like."

Without hesitation the two made their exit through the outside door, and just in time to see Bobby come shooting out of the front. He fell in a heap, but seemed to have recovered his wits somewhat, for immediately he rose to his feet, and went stagg ring off down the street in the direction of the Best Chance Saloon.

CHAPTER VIII.

A LITTLE LADY QUOTES HISTORY.

PETE BLOCKEY had gone out alone to view the town. He did not care to be troubled with company anyhow; and Ernest Roget, who had not had the thorough seasoning of the other, felt more like tumbling into the bunk that Sammy Sanders pointed out to him as his own. Feeling as he did, there was certainly no use in attacking the town. After a hearty supper he lit a cigar, intending to have a good-night smoke and then retire.

Sammy Sanders was quite a good man in his way, and, in spite of his other multifarious duties, managed to keep a reasonably good hotel, everything about the house being quiet and respectable.

At this hour of the night there might, of course, be a reason for it. Those that were not sleeping were probably out on the town. Roget was smoking quietly, his mind very far away from the locality, when he heard the lightest of footsteps, and looking up, by the dim light of a badly-trimmed lamp, was surprised to see that he was no longer alone, and that his companion was a woman.

"Pardon me for my boldness," said a sweet, musical voice, "but your name came to me by chance, and it seemed wonderfully familiar. Are you Ernest Roget, of St. Louis?"

"That is my name; but how did you come to hear it? I could have hoped, I could have almost sworn, that I was a stranger here."

"You cannot come to a place like this without some one knowing your name and business, and you may as well begin by announcing both on your arrival. I did, and I don't doubt its paying in the long run."

"I was not present, or I certainly should have remembered."

"No, you are a later arrival even than myself; but, like me, you halted first at Poison Pete's. In the boisterous merriment that followed, I suppose they lost sight of me and my errand. I may as well tell you that I am Della Venner, and my business here is to look after the Big Hope Mine, in which I should have the controlling interest."

She looked at him sharply as she spoke, but the statement seemed to arouse no new or special interest. He was looking at her as at a very handsome little lady—that was all.

"You know nothing about that, I suppose?" she added, suspiciously.

"Nothing, I assure you. The name of Venner is altogether unfamiliar, and I would not have journeyed into this strange section of civilization for the best mine in it. There are some things that a man can and will do in the hopes of a fortune, but I'd sooner die than live here to make it. I think, before you get through, you'll be of the same opinion."

"I would! I would!" passionately exclaimed the girl. "Nothing could draw me here except duty, and even for that it is hard—very hard!"

"Go back, then. From what I see, there is no necessity for your staying here, and no money can compensate you for the risk you are running."

"And you? Are not you, too, in some danger?"

"Some little, but nothing like that which will surround you. What were you thinking of? Have you no friends?"

"Ha, ha! You are judging me entirely by my dress. Because I have come in from the East is no sign that I am unfitted to take care of myself, or that I do not know the dangers I will be called to meet. Simon Venner's daughter is scarcely the one to give up her birth-right, even if it has dropped into the grasp of the worst man in the mines. Somehow I imagined, when I saw you, that in one way or another we have interests that may only meet, or may clash. I am always on the side of boldness and truth. I believed you could be an honest friend or an honorable foe, and for that reason was bold enough to meet you. If I have been

mistaken, pardon me; there has been no harm done. Good-night."

"Wait! You seem disappointed. What you expected I cannot guess; but I want you to be certain of my entire willingness to help you. It is only my ability I doubt. If you would tell me your story—for story you must have—I would better know what to say to you."

"You would indeed. Will you promise to listen to me closely, and at the end, advise me, if I tell you all?"

"You may be sure enough that I will listen; who could close his ears when a lady like you were talking?"

"But for advice—I am not so certain, except the advice I can give you now as well."

"And that is?"

"Take the straightforward course, whatever it may be. Go about your work honestly; try your best, and if you fail, go back to the life you are more suited for, and begin again, forgetting this one totally."

"Thanks. All that I have thought a thousand times, and will, probably, as many times again. And yet, it is hard to think that you must not meet fraud with fraud, or to believe that honesty will not go to the wall when stupendous villainy comes pushing against it."

"Nevertheless, try."

"I will," retorted the girl, hotly. "And for proof of my good intentions, will you listen to what I have to tell?"

"I would be a singular being if I did not. Of course."

"You understand, then, to start with, that Venner was not my father's name. That almost goes without saying. You and one or two more in all this camp are the only ones possibly that have not lost their baptismal appellation."

"You speak very confidently, for a stranger."

"I know more of this place—through my father's letters, and through a brief conversation with Sanders—than many a man who has lived here for weeks. If there are any prominent citizens in the camp, I know them—all save one. He, unfortunately, is comparatively a new arrival, though the worst of all. My father never mentioned his name, and it has been both a shock and a surprise to find that in what must have been the last moments of his life this man obtained such an influence over him that he left all his affairs in his hands."

"Ah, I think I can guess. You allude to Johnny Chase. I have already heard of him. He is the power here, and if you must fight him I am afraid that your case is indeed hopeless."

"I would think so, were it not for one thing. My father seldom made mistakes about the man in whom he was trusting; and it is hard to believe that he was altogether mistaken in this one. It seems like a horrible risk to run, since it will altogether expose my hand; but on the other side is the faint hope that he will act honestly by me when he knows who I am. If he does not, I will fight him tooth and nail; and be ready to believe the story I have already heard hinted—that he had something to do with the death or disappearance of Simon Venner."

"Ah, that is an idea; and one worth the trying, though the test is hardly a fair one. Yet this is scarcely the story you set out to tell me?"

"No. It is of our former life that I would speak; though I am scarcely sure that I am justified in so doing. Yet I have felt more confidence in you than in most on so short an acquaintance, and believe that you will advise me truly. I can tell it all in a few words. Hereafter, if need be, I can go more into detail."

She looked at him anxiously, as though his permission to proceed might be withdrawn, or, if renewed, might mean more than it yet had done.

He nodded once more.

"Simon Venner was no child when he went into business with Howard Kane, and the two seemed to hit it well enough together. Kane was far the younger, to be sure, but he was active, keen-sighted, and thoroughly willing to take the advice of his more experienced partner; and the firm prospered beyond their expectations. In a year or two they had doubled their original capital, and had established the name of the firm so thoroughly that they were able to launch out into ventures that had been far beyond their depth at first. The two men seemed the best of friends; and they were so until a woman came between them."

"A woman! Ah, that is strange. With so much difference in their ages as you seem to indicate, one can hardly imagine that a woman would care to make trouble."

"She did not care to do it. Heaven knows I never charged her with that. She couldn't help herself. She was Howard Kane's wife; and she foolishly and wickedly cared the more for the older man. I do not believe that my father cared for her, save as a friend, and I do not believe there was anything between them that all the world might not have known; but all of them made mistakes that were fatal. First, she disappeared. I think she only went away for a breathing spell, while she might get the better of her mad infatuation. What followed is not completely clear, but I think I know it as it was. Howard Kane, perhaps misled by some scheming

villain, attacked my father, and was killed. I know it was a struggle for life, in which father was driven to the wall; and then, in self-defense only, he struck.

"Then, without taking a dollar of the thousands he could have drawn upon he hid the body, and, dazed by a panic, fled. Thus I have figured out the story.

"It was some days before the hue and cry was raised after him, for at first, strangely as it may seem, the truth was not suspected. Then this and that was put together, and a case was made out a thousand times worse than the facts really justified, had they all been known as they really were. At that time I knew nothing of the truth; I could only guess at it; but my eyes had been partly opened, and I was not far wrong, though months passed by before I was made sure.

"Then I received a letter from my father, saying that he was well and prosperous, and that some day, sooner or later, I should join him though, for the present, I must act as though I had heard nothing from the fugitive.

"I had money enough of my own already, and with due care I wrote him to send me no more; that I would go away where I was not known, that I might the more safely keep up the correspondence with him; and that I believed with him that in the temper of the community and the unfortunate network of circumstantial evidence with which he was surrounded, it was best for the present to remain in unmerited obloquy.

"I went to St. Louis, ostensibly as a governess; and it was there I saw your face, and heard your name, so that I recognized you the moment I saw you here.

"I would have come to Angels' Flat nearly a year ago if he would have allowed it; and I wish now that I had done so. I might have saved him. He wrote cheerfully of his brilliant prospects here, and I was almost stunned when I received a letter stating that he had been killed by a fall over a canyon wall, and that his manager, John Chase, was in charge of the mine, and would look after my interests as though they were his own.

"At that I hesitated no longer. There was no one to dictate as to my movements, or even to note them. I gathered together what little money I had ready to my hand, and came here at once. I intend to claim my rights, to search the story of my father's disappearance to the very bottom, and if need be to avenge."

She ceased speaking and looked up at him inquiringly. Evidently, she had told her story with a purpose, and was anxious to see how it was accepted by Ernest Roget.

He listened as any man would to a story from so handsome a girl—but beyond that he showed no sign of interest. If Della Venner thought to arouse his enthusiasm she failed most signally.

"Why do you tell me all this?" he asked when the silence had continued long enough to be marked.

"I can give you no better advice than I have done; and for any aid that you can give the other—I think that I should rather ask it from you. Unless this one is different from any mining-camp I have heard of you can be felt here as a power if you go to work cautiously. Follow out your plan, then; and if at any time you think you need me you can certainly command my services, though I have affairs of my own that I must look after, which may take me away from here at any moment."

"If you cannot see now perhaps you will understand better some day. Meantime I have given fair warning that I am here to look after my interests. That may throw them off of their guard. If there is anything to discover I will learn it sooner or later. You are an iceberg, hard to melt, much colder than I thought, but my story has not been thrown away. Some time when I need a friend—must have one—I can call upon you and you will know just who I am, and what lies behind my request. To be utterly alone, here, would have made me feel like a pariah and an outcast. Now that I have, to some little extent, unburdened my soul I feel relieved. Thank you very kindly for having listened to me. I am tired with my journey to-day and can say no more, though I will soon see you again. Good-night."

She bowed and was about to pass away when there came an interruption, that had its ludicrous side, as well as its earnest one, and Roget almost forgot to drop the soft, slender little hand Miss Venner had extended to him.

CHAPTER IX.

LOVE AND THE LARDER.

ONE of the well-known fixtures of the house was Katrina.

What the balance of her name was, if she had any, had never transpired. Katrina, frequently abbreviated to "Old Kat," was enough for all practical purposes, and no investigations were made.

Katrina had the reputation of being the only female servitor, and the ugliest woman in the place. She was fat, frowsy and forty—four hundred would of course not be nearer the mark though it might have been considered less of a strain on the truth by any one who had an opportunity of viewing the damsel.

Women were none too plentiful at Angels' Flat, so that even Katrina was looked at with a subdued sort of interest, though no one desired a very close acquaintance. She handled the pots and pans, and presided over the culinary department in a good, solid way, that gave general satisfaction, but she was ugly enough to strike a basilisk blind.

While Ernest Roget and the little lady were in conversation they had heard her elephantine tread going by, but had given it no further attention; they heard her voice now, outside of the window, and as Miss Venner had seen the woman at the time she took her supper, and had heard her speak, there was no trouble about recognizing it. It was Teutonic all over, and about as soft as the rasp of a file.

"I tells you, dot vos no use. Ven you hungry you cooms 'round and say, Katrina, you von angel; und I d'ink dot vos der drudth, und dot Meester Plue-nose pees not so bad as he looks. Den I sot oud der pies, und der cakes, und der cold peef, und you shoost feels yourself fool, oop to der nozzle and sez, 'So long, angel, I sees yer all later.' Dot vos played oudt. You dry dot on any more you d'ink doonder und blitzen hit you. I'm an angel mit der cloob, und I mean pizzness from der wordt go."

"But see hyar, Katrina, I ain't hungry; I don't want er durned thing. I'se full up to ther neck—hic! Jes' incline yer opticle orick'lers while I tells yer ther honest facks. Ef yer wooman h'art don't want ter bu'st wide open yer kin call me—hic—a double bar'll liar, an' a dead-beat frum Bungtown. They's after me, an' ef you don't—hic—hide me till I git ste'ddy ernuf on my pins ter travel, yer own Bobby'll kick ther buckit, an' fall over inter ther flume."

From his tones it was plain that Bobby was under the influence of the ardent, and yet had been sufficiently excited to clear his head enough to realize his position. Ernest Roget noted that he came out in quite superior style on the presence of the woman, and smiled to himself. The bumner as a successful lover, and Katrina as an angel, with the larder of Sammy Sanders in reserve, explains the mystery of Blue-nose Bobby's continued existence which he had already heard commented on.

"Vot vos dot you vos givin' ov me? For vy dey vant you? Vot you pin a-doin' eh?"

"Gospel truth I'll tell yer, now thet yer torkin' like me owney, dovey duck ag'in. It war on ther jar—I'll sw'ar it war on ther jar; an' ther set-up ther stranger give me hadn't more ner jist started ther cobwebs. An' me coppers was jist red-hot, an' when I tried water on 'em it sizzled all ther way down. An' that's ther way it war—hope-may-die ef it ain't ther clean corn frum Cashtown."

"Vot vos der clean gorn? You don't vont ter vools mit me shoost much longer."

"Oh, I ain't er foolin'. It war—hic—at ther Saint's Rest, an' Johnny ketched me in ther cellar, samplin' ov his benzine. I dunno nothin' more 'cept some ov 'em held Johnny while ther rest fired me out; an' now, ef he ain't on ther war-path, 'ith blud in his eye—why not?"

"Vell, why don't yer git oudt? Vor why you shtands here ven be comes mit der pishtols undt plows der whole top ov yer head off so?"

"Run! Bobby Blue-nose run! What yer thinkin' ov, me angel? An' me full up to ther neck, an' me hoofs jist a tanglin' up like a lame duck's on a fresh friz pond. Beauty, me legs is drunk ef me tongue does do her duty. What I want are fur you ter hide me in ther leetle loft over ther eend ov ther shed till I kin run. Then, great snakes! look out, thar's no one keers a cuss hyer ef I lives er dies; an' Johnny Chase are after me 'th a hot stick. When you went back on me ther last link wor broke; an' I'll be gittin' outen hyar in ther mornin'. Then, when it's too late, mebbe you'll be wishin' fur B. B., ter be callin' you his queen ov trump, an' the gal w'ot's better ner any right bower w'ot war ever invented."

Bobby Blue-nose put a good deal of the languish in his latter sentences, and they struck home. Katrina seemed to reconsider her verdict when she found that fate had anticipated it for her.

"Vell, ef dot vos so, undt dere vos no odder blace for you, mebbe you findt oud dot Katrina vos youst so droo as never vos. Ven dot Chase man kooms dhis vay she'll be ready for him mit der cloob, too; undt do-morrow mebbe it be all right. So. Dhis vay, Katrina be der shaney, madle der die to."

This was the finale to the scene. The next moment Roget heard the bumner stumbling away, led by the woman; and if his face could have been seen just then it would have shown a look of disgust, for which he might well be pardoned.

"There never was a goose so gray,
But some day, soon or late,
An honest gander came that way,
And claimed her for his mate."

The words of the old jingle came into his head, and he repeated them over to himself with a sneer.

"Not a badly assorted pair," he thought, "as long as the grub holds out; but if anything happened to the Sanders commissariat I am afraid Katrina would look in vain for her earn-

est wooer. I wonder what Miss Venner thinks of this revelation."

He turned to look for Miss Della, but the interview which she was overhearing had proved too much for her, and she had quietly glided away.

"So she has not waited for an answer? Well, all the better for that, perhaps. We'll both have a chance to think it over, and perhaps by morning we can see things straighter. I'm off for bed. If Mr. Blockey don't want to hear sounds from home he'd better not wake me up when he gets in bed. That's all."

And Ernest Roget, having had quite enough of adventure for one evening, crawled off, without further questions, to his bunk.

He was tired from his journey, and despite the excitement he had experienced from his late adventures it was not long until he was sound asleep.

He need not have worried himself about Pete Blockey, and the chance of his making a racket when he came in. Mr. Blockey was an old bird, and never risked waking a pard for anything but the most important news. If he came in at all he did it so quietly that even the proprietor was not likely to know anything about it. At the very time Roget was making his soliloquy Pete was not very far distant, and in fact had been an unsuspected but highly delighted witness of the love scene in which Bobby Blue-nose and his Katrina had been the actors.

When Pete and Johnny Chase had seen the coat-tails of the bumner lifted over the doorstep and the old man staggering off down the street there was a momentary hesitation on the part of both. Pete was waiting for a lead, and Chase seemed as though he would be just as well satisfied if his chance partner was out of the way.

"He's nothin' but a drunken old blcat; guess you won't keer ter kerry ther thing any harder unless he kims sprawlin' round ag'in. Eh?"

"The man is worthless enough of himself, but what I'd like to know is, if there is any one behind him. You can bet high that he won't find any more cellar doors on the jar—and if he does there will be some one behind them, ready for him. But maybe some one opened this for him, and I'd just like to know if it could be this Snapshot Sam. You don't know the man, do you?"

"Pears ter me I've heerd ov him, but I wouldn't like ter swear this are ther same feller. If yer think ole Bobby's in cahoots what's ter hinder follerin' ov him ter see? There's chance enuff an' we might strike a lead. Mebbe yer don't know me but I'm Plumb Center Pete, an' a good man ter tie to. I'm game fur all thet's in ther ring."

"Come on then. We'll see where the old fraud goes to, and if it turns out that we catch him playing into anybody's hands there may be a speck of blood on the grass. I guess that don't scare you."

"Not very largely. I'm in this racket an' I'm willin' ter see it through to ther end."

Without further delay the two started on the trail of the unsuspecting Bobby, and though exercising due care they rapidly overhauled him. At a distance of only a few paces they were witnesses of his interview with Katrina, and Pete was fairly choking with laughter as the two departed in search of the hiding-place that should shelter the bumner from the wrath of Johnny Chase.

"That settles the question how the old stick-in-the-mud lives, but I don't know but what he's a more dangerous man than the boys have thought. I'll have an eye kept on him for a little, and see if he ain't a mighty good man to run out of town. He does no good, and he may be doing a heap of bad. I guess we can go back to the ranch now. Not much chance of his being out again to-night."

"I'm with you on that and I reckon ther boyees won't be sorry ter see us. Ef ther bank's gone bu'st fur ther night, I s'pose ther'll be a chance fur a hand at short keards, an' ef Peter Blockey don't gether in his sheer ov ther sp'iles it'll be a bad time fer sinners."

"You're a man after my own heart, if your boodle will hold out under the strain. If it don't there is no harm done. You seem to be a pretty square man, ready to sail in on the right side; and those are the kind I like. If I don't see anything worse you can refer to John Chase if any one asks what you are doing around here. If that don't answer the question at once, I will when the party gets to me."

"Thankee, pard, that's square talk, an' ther kind I like ter hear when I'm a stranger in a strange place. I s'pose yer don't know ov a op'nin' thet would suit a man ov about my size. I don't jest keer ter be known ez a gamblin', goodfer-nothin' cuss. I'm lightnin' on most any kind ov a hoss, whar ther pay's good an' ther work's ov ther right kind. If it's suthin' that sets me right with ther town at large you'll find me all thar."

"I don't know of anything just at hand, though I need men now and then of that kind to help me look after my mining ventures; but I haven't had a chance to size you up in that way. If it was tumbler juggling at the Saint's Rest, or looking out when the game is running,

or something of that kind, I could give an answer sooner; but posts of honor and profit take a peculiar sort of man, and I don't want to make any mistakes about them. So far I haven't."

"Yer won't make none on me if yer see a good thing thet yer ken ring me inter; but we won't talk no more 'bout it ter-ught. Maybe by mornin' you'll know me better. I've been thar, ez you kin see by my recommends, an' me face speaks fur itself. I ain't a-blowin' my bazoo quite ez loud ez usu'l, an' you don't talk ez bad ez yer reputashun. Guess we're both ov us nighter ter angels than they give us credit fur, an' when we shake it'll be fur keeps. Eh, ole man?"

As Johnny Chase had all along been thoughtful and preoccupied his talk had been milder than usual, and Pete had hardly had a chance to hear it with the bark on since the time when they left the cellar together. The little man from time to time cast wary glances round him, and seemed still slightly hopeful of catching a glimpse of the sport who had dropped through the trap.

By this time they had, however, reached the Saint's Rest, without a sign of Snapshot Sam, and they entered the saloon together.

Kate Chase had taken her departure about the time that the crowd had set out to explore the cellar, and the house was in the hands of the efficient bartender and a couple of attendant satellites, who found plenty to do ministering to the thirst which the strange occurrence had generated. As the two entered they found all things in order, and the town almost all there discussing the merits of the late game in a critical manner, but to a great extent willing to believe that Chase would never attempt to run a game on the trap principle when there were other ways that would be safer, and just as sure in the long run.

"Thanks," said Chase, as he heard this opinion freely expressed before his presence was known. "You're just about right, and if you look the trap up you'll find that it's an old affair, put there before I bought into the Rest. That sport must have known all about it, and chosen that sensational way to make his exit with the hoodie, to do me a bad turn and save himself the risk of a challenge to try his luck at a hand at short cards. We'll go over the house together and see if it's not as I say. If he didn't touch a spring from here then that bummer pulled the string from below, I've got him run to a hole, and a cat at the end watching it. If there's any developments I'll let you know in time for the funeral."

The silken tones didn't deceive any one very much. Johnny Chase seldom said much in advance, but his record was enough to show just what he would be apt to do, or try to do, when he met the lucky sport. It was evident that he felt, rather more than had hitherto seemed possible for him to feel anything, the attempt to throw opprobrium on his methods of running the Rest. If there had been nothing but the loss of his money, he would never have squealed. That was business. It was only when some one tried to crowd him personally, or the affairs of the town seemed to need regulating, that he became the bad man on wheels.

And even an enemy would have hesitated to express an opinion, however privately, that Johnny had worked the trap in his own interest. It might have been there from the time the building was erected; and it certainly had not been used for a very long time before.

While they were discussing the possibilities, and just as Plumb Center Pete and the proprietor were taking chairs on opposite sides of the table, Hank Weaver—one of Chase's satellites—came gliding into the room. He entered by the rear door, and quietly approaching his employer, laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Say, boss, I've got him kerrelled. If yer want him go fur him."

"Who, and where?"

"Snapshot Sam, ov course; an' he's gone ter bed, meek ez a lam' at Sammy Sanders's. Shell I take some ov ther boys an' roust him out? We kin hev a holy ole picnic, an' don't yer furgit it."

"No. See who he talks to, and watch that he don't get away in the morning. He's put up a couple of jokes on the Chase family; maybe I can pay him back in the same coin. If I can't, it will be time enough to lay out a smiling corpse."

CHAPTER X.

MOVING ON THE ENEMY.

THE game between Pete Blockey and the proprietor of the Saint's Rest was a shining specimen of skill and experience applied to a most unimportant affair. There was plenty of quiet fun, but no blood in it. Neither staked high, and each seemed to be watching the points of the other man.

Things moved along very quietly for some time, and when the two threw up the cards by mutual consent, they seemed the best of friends, and arranged to continue the game at some future time. Chase even went so far as to express a desire to see his newly-made acquaintance the following day. Then he nodded to the bystanders, made a motion to his assistants that meant the Rest might be closed as soon as it

could be cleared, and went through a side door to the little building adjoining, which he used as his domicile.

Kate was waiting for him.

"Well, who is he?" was her greeting.

"I'll never tell till some one tells me. He's a man in disguise, but one that I never met before; and I've met most of the sports that can carry a spread of sail like his. I am inclined to think he is tooting his own horn, and running his own market-wagon."

"And I think they are all in the same swim together. No ordinary man can be, either, or he never would have staked his life on being able to draw and fire, sending his bullet to the hair's breadth before I could crook my finger."

"I don't exactly see why you meddled with him at all."

"On general principles. When he announced that he was ready to champion that girl I made sure that he had decided on that long ago. You have had your chance to kill your man half a dozen times, and held back. I have sworn to draw trigger the moment I see and know. And I thought this might be he. I think so still, though you are so certain."

"That may do for a woman, but I'd hate to try that kind of work myself. I don't intend that he shall murder me if I can help it, and I swear I won't shoot him in the back. If he even knew who I was it wouldn't be so bad; but if I give him notice and go for him I'm not sure that he wouldn't catch the drop. As long as I can keep him from more mischief and run the chance of learning a point or two I don't think I'll inform him."

"That's the way I used to talk; I've got over that now. It is a fight for life—"

"Which the rest of the world don't understand; and might stretch even your dainty neck or my tough one if we stepped an inch over the boundary-line of the code of pistol ethics."

"John Chase, are you sure that you are not becoming a coward?"

"Scarcely, my dear, scarcely. If I was I would have some of the boys taking a sitting shot at him from behind Sammy's corner and then lighting out with a load of coin. I'll acknowledge that he has the run of the cards just now; but when I find that luck won't turn it will be time enough to begin dealing from the bottom."

"I understand—the gambler all over. And you have learned nothing at all of the man, who he is, where he came from, and if he has just assumed the sobriquet of Snapshot Sam?"

"Oh, I did get a little information from that tough, Blockey. I've heard of him before, and he says he has heard of the Pistol Sharp, though he did not care to be very communicative. He will bear watching, too—a good man, you understand, if you only know which side he can back to the best advantage. He is not here for nothing, and I hope to use him yet, even if he and Snapshot Sam are in partnership now. That will keep, though. You did not see the girl at all?"

"I was just too late to see her, but I heard of her. She is here, and doubtless we will hear from her soon enough. I am not sure but that it would have been best for you to have met her."

"No, no, I trust that to you. Make friends with her if you can, but don't crawl. If she wants to be high and mighty, let her explore the Big Hope by herself. McKinzie expects her, and will meet her like a Dutch uncle."

"Look out that he is not too friendly. He is only a man, and she is very handsome."

Chase gave a short laugh.

"McKinzie has a better-half in the East, that he adores. I'll back her absence against this young woman's presence, for the value of the mine, and that's a pretty big offer. No; he will enjoy the situation thoroughly, watch her like a hawk, and be true to the end. He is one man I can vouch for. Now I'll take a last turn through the Rest. While we do run it, it is as well to do it on business principles; and as I can't trust a soul about the house but you, it takes watching."

He left, at that, without having said anything very definite, and for an hour she sat there without moving. Then, as Chase did not return, she threw herself down on her couch, all dressed as she was, and eventually fell into a troubled doze.

Outside, the camp was very quiet. In spite of the preliminary flourishes and introductory overtures, no real circus opened at the Flat that night, and morning dawned without any "cold meat for breakfast."

At Sammy Sanders's the late arrivals were in no great hurry about rising, and the everyday boarders, of whom there were half a dozen or more, had finished their breakfasts, and in spite of the general curiosity to see the little lady who came in with Slim Jimmy the night before, had gone off to their various avocations before Miss Della came gliding into the dining-room, a moment after Ernest Roget had taken his seat.

She nodded brightly to the young man, who of course recognized her, though he had scarcely seen her face at the time they had held their conference.

He could not help but think, however, that she was a thousand times lovelier than he had imagined; and he had thought her voice liquid enough to belong to a very handsome woman.

Perhaps he showed his feelings in his look, for her face brightened still more.

"Good-morning, my friend. We have survived the night, and I cannot hear that anything very awful has occurred. Perhaps the town and its people have been overrated. At all events, I do not fear them a whit more than I did when I was at a distance. Have you been out among them any?"

He shook his head, with a smile.

"No, indeed. I have no desire to make the acquaintance of the ravenous beasts any sooner than I must. And you?"

"I will be at my work at once."

"How, if I may be allowed to ask?"

"Certainly you may. I have no secrets from you. I shall ride out to see the Big Hope this morning, and if possible interview some of the older employees. Mr. Chase knew that I was coming, and if he neither met me, nor put in an appearance within twelve or fifteen hours after my arrival, it is a sign that he does not care to, and that I am free to do my own best or worst. Can I count on your company?"

"Sorry to say that you cannot. You hardly imagine that I came to Angels for amusement. I have work of my own, and only after that is completed will I be at leisure to undertake the cause of another. Of course you understand that, incidentally, and at a pinch, I can be your friend; but for the present I belong to another."

He spoke very gravely, and Miss Della made no further effort to enlist his services in her behalf, though she gave a half-audible sigh as she answered:

"It was just because I believed that, at a glance, I read your character in all its faithfulness that I was so anxious to secure you. I believe that nothing would turn you back when you once had pledged your word and I shall say nothing more. Yet I may have a long fight and a hard one; and there may come a time when you can honorably aid me. How soon I could hope to count on you might be worth the knowing."

"Do not count on me at all. I am here to-day; I may be gone to-morrow. Chance brought my footsteps here; it may guide them away in an hour. I do not know; I cannot even guess. I can only wish you success, and leave you to your fate."

A steely glitter came into the soft eyes, and just for an instant her lips closed tightly, as though she might be keeping them from curving either in anger or scorn. Then she held out her hand.

"Thank you for your frankness. You are one of those that a woman can neither break nor bend, and as such I can respect you all the more. I will make my own fight, and alone."

"But you must not run any risks greater than the very fact of your presence. I doubt if there is a man here fit to be your friend. Before you do anything see if there is. Then, if John Chase shows his hand against you, as I fear he will, enlist him on your side."

Although he did not know it, Della Venner was influencing him more than he thought possible; and though she might not have been able to induce him to give her the assistance she asked for, he would doubtless have said much more had it not been for an interruption from Sammy Sanders.

"A lady ter see yer, miss, soon ez ye'r' done with ther grub. Sez she's kim ez yer friend, wich ther same she hev no doubt, ez she's strikly bizness from ther word go, an' you'll find her sich thar an' back ag'in. It's Missus Johnny Chase, an' ef ther boss ain't 'long with her it's 'cause he hed ter go out ov town. Shell I tell her you're a-waitin'?"

"I will go with you," was the answer, and she muttered to herself as she nodded a good-by to Roget:

"It must be war to the knife or he would never have dared to send that woman to me."

Nevertheless, prepared as she was to heartily hate and utterly despise, Della Venner found herself thoroughly surprised when a handsome, graceful young woman came forward to meet her. "Rustlin' Kate," as she had heard her called, was in her own way as beautiful as herself, in spite of her firm gaze, and the hard curl on her thin lips.

"You are Miss Venner?" said the stranger, extending her hand, with a firm, confident gesture.

"I am," replied Della, her hand grasping the other with a clasp almost as steady.

"We understood that you were on the way, and intended to meet you last night, but was delayed. After that, various matters which you will better understand when you are more acquainted with the peculiarities of Angels' Flat, interfered. I came first thing this morning, and am glad to meet you, and to welcome you here, where you have interests that will be all the better for your presence until they are thoroughly arranged."

"Yes, I am here; in defiance, as it seems, of the wishes of every one. Certainly I had little encouragement from your husband, who seemed

to think he could arrange my affairs better with me at a distance. No doubt he could."

There was enough of insolent sarcasm in her voice to make an average woman wince; but Kate Chase showed neither anger nor confusion.

"You are mistaken in that. Mr. Chase wrote several times explaining his views; if you have his letters yet you will see on second reading that you had mistaken his meaning if you made anything of that kind out of them."

"Ah, I expected the plea of innocence, and to be ready for it I have preserved the letters. To make sure of it you can examine them yourself. Is it any wonder that after receiving them I came myself?"

She handed the letters as she spoke, without the least apparent fear that they might be retained. That she should have such a suspicion was perhaps in the mind of Kate Chase, since she took them gingerly and held them in such a manner that it would not be hard to snatch them from her hand at any moment.

Carelessly she glanced at them at first, but as she read on, her interest grew, and now and then she looked up at the woman that was watching her.

"As no doubt you have seen these before, they only serve to refresh your memory; but, if I mistake not, you are finding them somewhat different from what you would have been glad to persuade me they really were, if I had not had them here to confound you."

"I admit I am confounded—but not in the way that you mean. I certainly never saw these letters before, and, what may seem strange to you, if you are acting in good faith, neither has Mr. Chase. His handwriting is well enough known in Angels, and if you have any doubts you can go out and ask the first man you meet. He will assure you that it is not his. It is scarcely necessary to ask you if they are copies, since their contents are too widely dissimilar from those of the originals, as I remember them."

The two looked at each other keenly. There was something to be said on either side, supposing that each was acting honestly.

"Not his writing? Not the letters that he sent? What then am I to believe?"

"That some one has had a hand in the correspondence who has his own ends to serve; and they, without a doubt, are as hostile to your interests as to ours. Beware how you move in the matter. If you will take the advice of one who would really be your friend, keep to your room for the day. By to-night, or to-morrow at the furthest, John will see you, and both convince you that the suspicions you have are unfounded, and take some means to discover what the woman that wrote those letters had in view."

"The woman?"

"Yes, the woman. Disguise it as she may try, it was a woman's hand that penned those lines, and a woman with a scheme. No doubt there is some one in the background further still, and he it is that we will have to reach before you can hope to enjoy your own in peace."

"I cannot believe you. It is only part of your plan to draw me from the investigation that first of all I had planned to make. Dare you tell me how my father died?"

"I would dare, but I cannot, since I do not know. As I have told you, my husband will see you upon his return, and will probably explain all. Until then, beware how you give your confidence to a living soul. You have foes here that you do not dream of, while he has no friends that count in such an emergency, but scores of enemies."

"Thank you for your advice. Whether it is good or bad makes but little difference, since I do not intend to take it. I shall meet him and hear whatever account of his stewardship he may choose to give, but for the rest I shall take my own good way and pleasure. Is that sufficiently plain?"

"I see," said Kate Chase, rising, but without a shade of anger in her tones, "that you mean to fight us on general principles. That is your mistake, as you will find out before you get through; but have your own way. It will cost you dearly before you get done, and perhaps us, also; but there is a heap of satisfaction in such a course, especially to a woman. Good-day."

As Miss Della had all along been showing her antagonism, and Kate Chase had the reputation of not being the best-tempered person in the world, it was hardly to be wondered at that the conference should be broken off without any definite statements for the future being made by either, and as the visitors swept out that a sigh of relief should be trembling on Della's lips.

"Not so dreadful a person to deal with if one only takes her firmly from the start. And having a woman to face is a different thing from potting these half-drunken miners, who are all paid for, anyhow. But now to my work. If there is anything to be gained by prompt work and a bold stand for our rights, we ought to be millionaires, at the least, before we get out of this wilderness. Is John Chase at the Big Hope, or is he only keeping in the background until his wife has had a chance to size me up? If he is

there, he will stand a good chance to meet me in spite of himself, for to the mine I go, if only to show them all that I mean business from the word go. A guide of some kind I must have, and I only wish I could have prevailed on Ernest Roget to accompany me on my trip. Once committed to my interests, and he would never give up."

The young lady was evidently willing to run any ordinary risks, but she was not quite so foolish as to start off on an exploring expedition by herself if it was possible to have company, and even poor company was better than none.

So she told Sammy Sanders, when, upon being called into consultation, he had assured her that strange as it might seem to her, it was a little doubtful if any one would care to be her escort to the Big Hope without a clearer understanding of her intentions than she seemed disposed to give.

"Yer see, miss, the boys hardly keer ter go snookin' 'round Johnny Chase's headquarters ef ther's a chance fer ther picnic ter turn inter a shootin' scrape. Women are drefful keerless critturs, an' ef you did open ther ball, a man with any sand at all wouldn't keer 'bout quittin' while you stayed. An' thar's no denyin' but what Johnny—he's a chief. Howsomedever, ef ye'r bound ter go, thar's a wu'thless, no-count sorter fraud lyin' 'round ez kin show yer ther trail—which are somewhat tangled, I'll allow—ez good ez a better man; an' ef Johnny takes him in, thar won't be no tears shed, ef yer would reesk it."

"And who is the no-account man? Are you sure that he knows the way? For the rest I must depend upon myself, anyhow."

"Blue-nose Bobby are ther handle which he are knowed by, an' I'll gamble on it thet yer can't lose him. But he ain't much fer good-looks, an' ef you'd only wait, mebbe suthin' would turn up—"

"Produce him. So he does what he promises I'll do without the good looks. And if either of us gets left, this will provide beforehand for the funeral."

As she spoke, she placed in Sanders's hand a note large enough to cover the expenses of several Arizona funerals, and after such a display of stubborn decision, it was hardly worth while to argue. The landlord had seen Bobby loitering around a few moments before, and knew that he had not had time to get out of sight unless he had suddenly increased his ordinary rate of progression. He went out, and was gone but a moment. When he returned he had with him as uncouth and squalid-looking a man as Della had ever seen.

Yet, on examination, his answers were prompt enough, and there was an assumption of knowledge about him which, backed by what Sanders had said, satisfied her that he would serve her purpose. With very few words the bargain was made, and to the amazement of the Angels the two rode away together in search of the Big Hope.

CHAPTER XI.

BLUE-NOSE HUNTS A HOLE.

BOBBY BLUE-NOSE was just as well qualified as a better man to act as a guide to the Big Hope Mine, and Sammy Sanders had only shown his natural shrewdness in suggesting him. The bumner wasn't much for work, but he had been very industrious in his efforts to pick up a living without it, and had lounged around every camp and claim within a score of miles of Angels' Flat. As he was blest with a pretty good memory he had the country down fine, and with nothing to lose was willing to traverse any part of it.

There was a question whether he could ride, for no man at Angels had ever seen him on a horse; but that was solved in the outset by Miss Della depositing the value of the two animals to be returned when the horses came back. After that all baggage was at the risk of the owner, and Sammy didn't care whether he stuck on or not.

There was another question, however, that was agitating Miss Della's mind, and which she had not yet been able to solve.

Was Blue-nose so far gone with whisky and bad living as to make him unfit for service? If not, and he was at all controllable, Della rather thought that the uses to which she could put him would furnish him employment for some time to come.

To solve this as well as for other information she asked after they had journeyed long in comparative silence:

"You know the way to the Big Hope Mine, do you, old man?"

"You kin put up all yer sequins on that thar. A right smart ov a ride, too, an' no end of chances fur bad luck. Ef I war you I would jest turn right round an' go back ag'in. Mister Chase are ther most keerless man 'bout slingin' lead thet you ever seen. Ef its word yer want brung to him I kin take it jest ez good ez ef we all both go."

"No doubt, no doubt; but I prefer going myself. You all seem to have a wholesome fear of the man, though, from some few things I myself know and have seen, I don't think that he is, at

all events, much better than his reputation. Tell me. Why should we fear him?"

"Bless yer leetle, lam'-like soul, I ain't afeard ov him. What's ther use ov Blue-nose Bobby bein' afeard ov anything? Thar ain't much ter live fur, an' when it comes ter dyin', ain't I jest ez much right to travel over ther range ez any other man? I've got a glimmerin' sorter ideam thet he cotched me las' night a-snookin' 'round his lay-out, an' I reckon he won't be wantin' ter see me bad this mornin'; but what's ther odds ez long ez things is as they must be, an' yer time ain't come?"

"I see you are a philosopher as well as a close observer. At the same time you don't answer my question. I didn't say that either of us feared him; but I asked why we should, meaning, of course, in the minds of the good people who have set up this man Chase as a kind of hobgoblin, to scare women and children with?"

"Wal, miss, when it kims ter foolin' 'round ther edge ov a cyclone, what yer don't jest know which way she's a-goin' ter whoop when she starts ter goin', it's jest ez nat'ral fur them ez hez seen ther way ov ther critter afore ter hunt the'r holes ez it are ter down ther bug-juice when benzine are free an' nobody a-lookin'. Yer see he never talks 'less he means suthin', an' he don't talk loud er long, but he does it mighty slow; an' arter that thar's silence, er suthin' draps. You put his stiffs eend ter eend an' they'll jest build a kerrel clean 'round ther Flat, an' leave ernuf in one corner ter start a good size graveyard. Don't make no diff'rens, rough, tough, er bad man, he scoops 'em right in."

"And the Flat stands it?"

"She's got ter. Whar's ther use of kickin' when ther man what's runnin' things jest keeps ther camp regurlated ter ther top notch an' makes it peaceable ez a meetin'-house. Afore he took hold ov ther drag-rope they was a-cuttin', an' a-stabbin', an' a-gougin', permiscuss like, day an' night, an' nobody knowed how many he'd hev ter fight when he begun ter chuck lead. Now, it's fair play er mount Johnny. Ther wu'st ov ther toughs are killed off, an' ther rest sing small when he's in town. I ain't a-lovin' ov him, nohow, but he's got his good p'int, ez I'll allers allow. An' ef so be yer hes ary biz with him jest don't fcol 'round in ther bushes outside, but kim right out inter ther open' an' Johnny Chase 'll meet yer half-way."

It was something of a surprise to hear the bumner talking this way, for, from what she had heard and seen, she had been ready to hear him speak on the other side. It might be that he was only trying her, or it might be that he was suspicious; but it was pretty certain that she could get no great amount of information out of him, and so, at this advice, which of course she had no idea of taking, she turned away and rode on in silence, paying more attention than she had been doing to the road and her surroundings.

She was a very shrewd little woman; and if she gambled somewhat on the deference due and generally accorded to her sex, she was wise enough to take what precautions she could to prevent any "accident" that might either work her personal harm, or interfere with the progress of her plans. Although unwilling to venture in search of the Big Hope without a guide she had been just as unwilling to trust altogether to him, and had made her inquiries so that really she could have most probably found the way without him.

No, looking around, there was something wanting in the landscape, and she suddenly drew rein.

Though not at all certain of being off the track she wanted to go over in her mind the directions, see about where the time she had been traveling would have brought her, and then judge if she was where she ought to be.

A moment's silence and she looked up at Bobby, who was scratching his head and looking around in a bewildered sort of way.

"Old man, either you know less about the road than you were supposed to, or else you have been fooling me for some purpose of your own. Which is it? Speak quick, I am only a woman, but I can protect myself, if need be, at the point of this."

She swung her hand up as she spoke, and if he had been the best man at the Flat he would have been covered all the same with the shining little revolver she had jerked from some unsuspected receptacle.

"Good laws, miss, don't! It mou't go off. Can't yer see I'm clear dumb-blasted? Never seen no sich mix-up sence I kim outen ther ark with Noaher; Dog-gone my cats ef I hain't bin goin' straight fur Ben Gurley's Slap Jack while you's a-talkin' so comfortable like; an' I'd never noticed it ef yer hedn't spoke. True ez preachin', ther Big Hope lies over yander. I'm a idjit by note an' a fool on wheels."

He pointed with a remarkably dirty finger as he spoke, and fairly sunk into his saddle in abasement and terror.

"Over there" is a very indefinite direction, and I suppose if I attempted to follow it I would land myself in a worse place than this. The only plan that I see is to go back and take a fresh start from the first bearings I can recog-

nize. Come along. I'm not done with you yet. Wheel your horse and ride a shade in advance, so that I can be sure of no tricks on travelers."

"Thankee, miss, I didn't mean ter throw off on ther job, an' you'll find me all thar. Eh? Fire an' blazes! It's time fer kiver."

Somehow, at the exclamation her eye left him for an instant as she looked down the trail along which they had just come.

That was Bobby Blue-nose's opportunity.

Without seeming to pick his place at all he rolled off his horse, alighted fairly on his feet, and then sprung headlong into the bushes. For just an instant there was a vision of a flying ball of rags and dirt, and then he had disappeared for good and all.

Miss Venner heard him go, but she made no effort to intercept his flight. Something in front demanded her attention more. Not fifty yards away and coming on at a rapid trot, were three horsemen.

The strangest thing, at first sight, was the fact that their approach was almost noiseless; and it was only when she darted a swift glance downward that Della saw the explanation. The horse's feet were muffled. As the faces of the riders were masked it was pretty evident that there was some mischief afloat.

An instant for thought; then her resolution was taken. Up went her hand, and this time it covered the leader of the three.

"Halt, there!" she cried, in a clear, ringing tone. "Till I know who you are, and why you are following me, not a step further. Halt! I mean it; and at this distance I am a certain shot. Do not tempt your fate."

The three drew in together, gaining a little on the distance between them, but not enough to tempt a shot. Then the foremost held up his hands.

"We know what a desprit shuter you be, pritty; an' we ain't no wish ter hev yer try yer hand on us. 'Cause why, 'cause it ain't no fair shake. You ain't wuth a durned red copper to us dead; an' we ain't wuth nothin' ter you, 'live er dead. But don't crowd us, fer ef we do shute, ez it stan's ter reason we will ef we hev ter, ther' will be a dead gal lyin' in ther road, an' we'll be goin' on to ther next town."

"You ruffians! Speak out clearly. What do you want? If it is money, I have not a dozen dollars with me. Them you can have, but you come no nearer. I'll throw them in the road if you go back a hundred yards, and then go back myself far enough for you to pick them up."

"Money, miss, in sich dribs ez those, ain't ov no 'count ter us; it's emplyment we's after. Ther best plan fer you are ter throw down that leetle piece of iron, with a hole in it, an' hold up yer han's. Mebbe yer don't know it, but yer wuth at ther least half a million; an' we count on handlin' a right good sheer ov it."

The start that Della Venner gave showed that the words of the outlaw, if such he was, had affected her strongly. Half a million! There was a possible chance that he was telling the truth; and for half a million, or even a large bite into it, three desperate men would do a great deal.

"Don't try it, miss," hastily interposed one of the others.

"You're thinking if you can get away with all of us; but you can't. Alive or dead we'll gather you in, and don't you see that it's really to our interest to have you drop one or two of us? There'll only be more for what's left of the gang, and we're willing to run the chances as to which one comes out all right."

The coolness of the fellow had an opposite effect to that he intended. Her eyes glittered and her wrist was steady as iron.

"The last warning. Back! or I fire!"

At the same time she shook her bridle-rein. Without further urging her steel darted forward, and before he had gone half a dozen strides her finger tightened on the trigger.

She was just a shade too late. The three were coming on to meet her, and at the moment she fired they suddenly disappeared.

It was only a frontier trick, but it showed that she had no novices to deal with, and for the moment it startled her. She did not realize that they were only hanging, Indian-fashion, along the sides of their horses; and when the leader suddenly threw up his hand, peering along the neck of his steed, and planted a bullet squarely in the forehead of the horse she rode, she was all unprepared for the fall that followed, and horse and rider went down in a heap.

The three gave a shout of triumph and plunged forward. Before she had recovered her senses Della Venner was in their hands.

"A plucky little wildcat," said one, as, catching her two wrists in his grasp, he raised her to her feet. "Here, take her along. I guess she'll be willing to listen to reason when she comes to herself. If she don't, there won't be any more shooting. I tell you she can pitch lead plumb-center if you give her time."

"Kerrect; an' I don't want ter stand any more ov sich chances. Eh! what's that?"

A man stepped out into the open. His hands were hanging carelessly by his sides, and the flowing rim of his hat had been hit hard, and now stood straight up from his broad, white

forehead, from underneath which a pair of glittering black eyes flashed on them.

"I'm Snapshot Sam, the Pistol Sharp from 'way down, and I'm backin' ov the young lady's game. Hands up, quick! or bite lead, and down you go."

CHAPTER XII.

KING STORK.

Of the three, not one had a weapon in his hands, but neither had Snapshot Sam, earnestly as he spoke, and the man who had been acting as leader made a quick snatch at one of the revolvers in his belt.

"No you don't, Mr. Buckley; not any of that in mine. Steady be jerks, and then you have it."

No one saw where it came from, but the sound of an exploding revolver drowned the last few words, and the leader staggered back, shaking his hand, on which a red splotch began on the instant to show itself.

"Look a leetle oud," continued the Pistol Sharp. "There's no use to begin mussin' with me. I kin put 'em whar I want 'em, an' thet mou't hev been through yer head, er heart, jest ez well. One ov yer are counted out, an' ther other two I've got kivered. See, now? Shell I shoot, or will you git?"

"We'll git, you bet," retorted one of the men, in a savage tone. "It's not our day on; but the next time it may be, if Johnny Chase don't do ther job fer us."

"Don't worry 'bout Mister Chase. When he goes gunnin', he'll keep his own taffy; an' ther funder you're away from ther frolic, ther better it'll be all 'round. That's 'bout ernuf back slack. You hear me?"

It was a little doubtful whether they did, for they were scrambling on their horses, and the moment they got into saddle they dashed off at a great rate, leaving Snapshot Sam in undisputed possession.

"A thousand thanks!" exclaimed the little lady, as she saw them vanishing around a convenient bend in the road. "You saved me, and you shall not find me ungrateful."

She looked keenly at the Pistol Sharp as she spoke. During all the affair she had never lost her self-possession.

"Don't holler till yer git clean outen ther woods," was the careless answer.

"Thar wa'n't no great shakes or sand in mountin' sich a crowd ez them, an' ef you'd hed a leetle experiens along with yer grit, I think yer mou't hev bin able fur 'em yerself. Ef it hed bin three men like me, now—go 'way, snakes! I tell yer thar would 'a' bin a bloody time. What yer doin' 'round hyar, anyhow?"

In a few words she told him of her intended visit to the Big Hope, with an eye to a view of the property, and the possibility that Chase, who had vanished from the Flat, might be forced to a meeting there.

"An' what yer goin' ter do when yer see him?"

"Force him to an account of the property that should be mine."

She spoke promptly and with vigor, but a not unhandsome smile stole over the face of her rival.

"Mebbe yer don't think you've bit off reethyer more ner you kin chaw; but I guess ther Flat would ef it heared yer talk. But I like a girl with pluck, an' blamed ef I hain't half er no-shun ter go 'long. Johnny's gunnin' fur me, anyhow, an' he'd be gladder ner a hen with ten chicks ter see me loomin' up afore him. You didn't count on goin' inter ther lion's den alone, did yer?"

The defection of Blue-nose Bobby was briefly explained.

"Run at ther fu'st squeal, did he? Good fur Bobby! That's jist what I'd 'a' done, too—ef I'd 'a' bin him. But say, now, yer ain't no idear what them three war after? Don't look ter me like sure 'nough road-agents. Hedn't ther sand fur that. Didn't drop a hint, did they, what sorter game they might be playin'?"

"Yes, they hinted strongly enough, though I am not sure they were not going on a venture. Is the Big Hope worth half a million?"

"It's worth what yer kin git outen it; but what that are I'll never tell. I kin see thet game, though; an' it's mighty good fur you thet it war blocked. Now, ef ye'r really ready fur a fly at Johnny, kin erlong. I kin take yer thar ez well ez a better man."

"I am ready, since I suppose there is nothing to be done with those ruffians."

"Nary thing but let 'em skip. Off we goes."

He slipped another cartridge into the empty chamber of his revolver, and returned it to its place. Then he caught the horse left behind by Bobby Blue-nose, and assisting Della to mount, turned in the direction in which the Big Hope was supposed to lie. Miss Della had got rid of a timorous assistant, and in his place had procured a man of sand.

"Bein' ez I'm a perfeck stranger mebbe I oughter hev brung reccomends, but ef we git back erlive from this leetle fate de shangpaters. I'll show yer a bull trunk-full. An' by that time mebbe I won't need 'em. Give me a chance an' I kin gin'rally blow me own horn."

"I think so," responded Miss Venner soberly.

"You are perhaps not as much of a stranger as you think. I heard of your adventures last night; and the town is watching the hotel this morning, for the purpose of furnishing you some more. How did you get away without being seen?"

"Dunno ez I did, an' dunno but that I did. Menkind hez a way ov takin' keer ov thet'r pre-shus healths which it are fun ter think ov. Ez long ez Johnny Chase ain't at ther front ther balance sing low. An' so ye'r takin' me on trust 'cause I ruffled round town las' night ez though I owned ther burg, an' bu'sted ther bank at ther Saint's Rest, callin' ov ther turn? Oh, glory! Ther innersens ov these females are remarkable!"

"And why should I not?"

"Because!"

And then, to or with, the woman's reason, he gave a reason of his own, quick and convincing.

As she spoke she had turned her face toward him, a careless smile on her lips; and her eye scarcely caught the movement of his hands before he had seized her wrists, wrenched them behind her back, and snapped upon them a pair of handcuffs, that fitted as though made for her arms.

Her one little cry of alarm was mechanical. After that, though her face grew white and hard set, she was voiceless and stern.

"Ther fryin'pan hez took to her heels an' got; now yer dealin' with ther fire. Dunno ez ther exchange are ez profitable ez yer mou't like; but it suits me to a t-y, ty. Hev yer anything ter say why senten's ov death sh'u'd not be pronounced?"

No answer, except in the look that seemed like the shadow of murder itself.

"Yer think I won't kill? Wal no, leetle woman, I guess not. Yer too vally'ble fur sich nonsense ez those. An' ther bull thing did slick ez a whissel. By this time Bobby Blue-nose hez got 'most ter ther Flat—an' ther story he'll tell 'll make thet'r eyes bulge out with fatness, an' Johnny Chase jist rise up on his hind legs an' howl. Then ther three galoots ez wanted ter play road-agents ain't got done runnin' yit, but when they does they'll snatch ther masks, turn ther coats, crawl inter Angels from ther other side, an' keep mighty quiet till ther racket hez got clean simmered down. An' ther Flats 'll be wonderin' fur a week whar ther daisy leetle flyer hez gone to. Oh, it'll be too rich fur anything; an' me layin' 'round innercent ez a lam'."

The Pistol Sharp chuckled to himself: rubbed his hands, and grinned at Della Venner in a way that would have set her teeth on edge if she had not been thinking of something else.

"This outrage is worse and more cowardly than the other. I suppose it is hardly worth while to ask you what are your intentions?"

"Ter git even, me sweet child, ter git even. It's not money I'm after. I can find a farobank every week in the year whar they don't bar me out, an' win more coin than I kin spend er kerry. Not much. It's good, solid, oh-bejoyful revenge; an' I'll hev it, clean up to ther nines."

"Revenge! You are mad, man. How have I ever harmed you?"

"That's a leadin' question, an' I kin give yer a clean answer. Old man Venner jumped my claim an' sot up sich a game on me ez would make angels weep. Then he crawled off over ther range afore I got back, an' left me ter study how ter git even. When his darter kim along it war jist my pie. I intended to set 'em up on Johnny Chase, ez Simon's friend, but when I heard his darter hed arrove, it made me shout all over. I'll work both rackets now, fur all they're wuth."

"You dastardly villain! Do you really mean to say that you would take revenge on a girl for the spite that you still hold against her dead father?"

"That's about ther size ov it; but it ain't no use ter fool away time hyar, when thar'll be heaps ov it by an' by, an' not so much danger ov interrupshun. Kim, my angel, it's time ter be a-movin'."

Her sharp words hurt him no more than rain harms a duck's back. He simply drew her bridle-rein over his wrist, spoke lightly to the horses, and rode leisurely away.

She was, of course, at liberty to throw herself down; but what would that profit her? More than likely, with the gyves on her wrists, she would have fallen to serious harm; and in any event she would be no better off.

A hundred yards and then—

There was still another surprise in store for her. Right at her side, as it seemed, she heard a clear, girlish voice:

"Heavens and earth, old gentleman, what have you in tow now? I thought something must have happened to you and was coming to find out. Things are even worse than I feared. Better to meet a roaring lion than one of our sex with that look on her face. Look out for breakers when she gets loose."

There was a laughter in the ring of the tones that showed their owner was neither shocked nor surprised, and Della Venner understood that the two were friends and allies, and that she had nothing to hope from the meeting.

"Thar's no imejut danger ov sich a cateras-

trophy. I allows ter git all I kin, an' keep all I kin git—ov w'ich this lady are a most important part. You kin be friends er not by'mby, but thar's no time fur foolin' now. Any ov ther boys at home?"

If his eyes had been resting on the two, he might have asked a different question. They were staring at each other strangely, even while the question was answered:

"A couple. Enough to hold the ranch if you don't trust me."

"Yes, I see. They're on the lookout. Thar comes Jim, ther dropper, now. Ride on ther other side ov ther fair captyve an' amuse ther lady. I've got su'thin' ter figger out."

"Your wish is law, and I can't say I object to the task as long as looks don't murder. Ha, ha! Don't, my dear! There are worse than we in the world, when you come to know us. Some day you'll own it—if you live long enough."

Without a word, Della rode on between the two.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SENTENCE OF THE COURT.

"GIMME a drink! Fur ther love ov heaving gimme er drink!"

Bobby Blue-nose staggered into Poison Pete's and gasped out his appeal to the indignant surprise of the proprietor, who had not been posted as to the proceedings of the little lady, who had made the passing call the previous evening.

"You git outer this afore I break you all apart!" shouted Pete, lounging forward, with a not very pleasant look in his eye. The bummer was sometimes tolerated in the place at the request of his customer but this was cheek too brazen for any use; and he meant what he said. If it had not been for a bystander Bobby would have gone out, neck and crop.

"Hold on, Pete. Looks as though the old man has something to say and hadn't the wind to say it. Set 'em up for him, and if the story isn't worth the fluids I'll take it out of his hide. I saw him riding out of town a bit ago with the little woman that's stopping with Sammy Sanders. As he's back again on foot something must have happened. I take it that Bobby isn't the fellow to walk when he can ride."

Blue-nose turned a look of fervent thankfulness toward the speaker as he saw Poison Pete's hand move toward the vial which held liquid happiness.

"Jest ez you please, Mr. Dare. A gentleman is allers welcome ter choose how ter spend his money at the Best Chance; an' ther cuss *does* look exhausted like."

There was no mistake about that; and the longer he stood the more he showed it. His face was deeply flushed, his breath came quick and fast, and he appeared to be on the verge of collapsing from exhaustion. With shaky hand he seized the bottle and poured out nearly a tumblerful of whisky, taking both hands to raise it to his lips. That he did not strangle over the fiery decoction he allowed to run down his throat was a wonder.

It did him good, though. He braced up and turned toward Sid Dare again.

"Ye'r' right, Mister Dare, I come ez quick ez legs c'u'd bring me, an' ef I hadn't hed big news I'd 'a' died on ther road. Oh, thar ain't no luck when I go hossback ridin', an' ther never war."

"Now, see here. None of that. Just you tell us what it's all about. Come right down to the hub and be done with it—or there will be a dead bummer. You understand me?"

"Ow! Yah! Hol' on! I'll tell yer ef you'll let up long enuff! Fur ther sake ov grashus, don't!"

Bobby, on whom the whisky had had a sudden and a remarkably reviving effect, had settled himself back in a way that betokened a long story—and Sid Dare was impatient. He had caught the old fellow by the ears and banged his head against the wall with a vim that made him just howl and brought him to his bearings at the very first application.

"All right; go on with your clean-up. If it don't pan out big and no more foolishness about it, you know what to expect."

"Wal, gentlemen, I war ter pilot ther leetle angel out to ther Big Hope an' me an' her war a-talkin' so confederashul like ez we jist went plumb by ther forks ov ther road, an' fu'st thing yer knew run slap inter ther road-agents. Thar war nigh onter a hunderd ov 'em, an' giants they war, I tell yer. Every last one ov 'em six foot high, an' big 'round in perporshun. Thar we wos, an' thar wos they, an' w'ot wos we ter do? I kivered ther leader ov ther gang, an wos 'bout ter pick trigger when she sez, 'Bobby, git back, an' roust up ther camp,' an' I got. I may hev killed a dozen er two, fer ther wos some lively shootin' ez I climbed outen ther highway, an' I socked it to 'em back; but hyar I be, an' thar be she, an' what yer all goin' ter do 'bout it? Ef this hyar camp don't go fer them thar road-agints I sw'ar I'll jump it an' go somewhar ez they are white. You hear me?"

It was hardly worth while to ask that question. They did hear him, and though the burden of his news had been anticipated from his actions the excitement was none the less

among the dozen listeners. It would have done Miss Venner's soul good if she could only have heard what was said.

"You're giving it to us straight?" asked Dare the coolest of them all, as he again made a movement toward Bobby's ears.

"Straight ez a string, leavin' out ther killed an badly wounded. Bein' ez I war in a hurry I can't jest sw'ar ter them. But I'll take my afferdavits that I heered shootin' goin' on, an' I wan't altergether absent when she war done. An' I lef' ther leetle woman with ther agents while I come on ter git help. What yer goin' ter do 'bout it?"

"Going to rouse the town!" exclaimed Dare. "These men in the brush can take in a stray pilgrim now and then and welcome; but when it comes to the first good-looking woman that has strayed here since I struck the town I'll have a say if every other man in the game bunches his cards. Hurrah, boys. Let's sail out and raise the town."

Sid Dare's advice was almost superfluous. Even Poison Pete thought of the advisability of closing his ranch, and joining the little army; while every one else that was there was wild to go.

Angels Flat proper was not exactly a city, and the majority of the men who slept in it were now away at their toil; but there was plenty of material of one kind and another to take fire. Before many minutes the excitement had gathered it all to a common center, and that center was Sammy Sanders, whither an adjournment had been made for further information.

As Sid Dare had put in the heaviest hand toward setting the ball rolling he had a front pew in the meeting—of which no one expected a very long session, though the crowd could not go scrambling off without some sort of a pre-arranged plan.

"You know pretty much all about the outrage," said Sid, as he saw that he was expected to say something. "We've heard all about these little games of hands up according to the average run; but this beats the average, and calls for something to be done. When a man of sand holds up a coach and goes through the crowd for all they've got, we just say, 'Serves them right,' and think no more about it. The man that can't take care of what he has, gets precious little sympathy in this world. But this is a different thing. Here's a woman just riding from one part of the camp to another, and they gobble her in. I don't reckon that Bobby stayed to see the outcome, and it may be that she is coming in all right; but supposing that she isn't? Then Angels' Flat ought to show that it is willing and able to protect a woman; or if they can't do that, to avenge her. I don't suppose there is much of a gang; but, big or little, we can clean it out. How does that strike you all?"

The answer from a score of voices was so enthusiastic that it was hard to distinguish exactly what it was, but it was certainly a call to go ahead in one way or another, and Sid Dare felt authorized to take it for granted that the crowd would follow.

"That's what I thought from what I've seen of the Flat. Now, we'll hear Bobby's little story once more, and then, with him for a guide, this outfit starts on the war-path."

Bobby told his story, and they made him cut it down even closer than he had done at Poison Pete's. Then the "outfit" drew up to start.

There were about a dozen horsemen all told, and though the horses for the most part were not such as the Flat would have cared to invest their money on in a sweepstakes for coin, they would answer well enough for a scramble into the mountain.

"One moment, gentlemen!"

The address in a woman's voice brought everybody that was not already looking that way, to a right-about-face.

It was Kate Chase that was talking.

"I don't know much about this trouble, but I suppose that it's a game set up to get money somehow. The Chase family have an interest, and they are willing to back the young lady with what money they have; and if John was here he would be along with the rest. I'll pledge a thousand dollars' reward if you bring in the young lady; and if there must be more put up, call around at the Saint's Rest. When there's no chance for it any other way, you can count on the Chases' last dollar to see the little lady through."

Kate Chase didn't say much, but she spoke as though she meant it, which was the way she generally did, and her speech was greeted with a cheer. The men were ready enough for the work anyhow, but this assurance that the king of the camp would back them, was an encouragement that sent them on their way rejoicing. The absence of Johnny from the town was known, and of course no one expected the madame to start on the expedition herself, though probably it would not have been much of a surprise if she had proposed it.

Without much order, but with a bold front, the little army skurried along the road, and as they neared the spot that Bobby had described as the scene of the catastrophe, the better

mounted pushed recklessly to the front. It was not likely that they would strike the masked men there, but every one was anxious for a sight of some traces of the affair.

Blue-nose Bobby would have fallen away behind if he had had a chance, and he approached under a very evident protest; though he said nothing when the willing hands of the nearest kept stirring up his steed. They wanted him well to the front, which was just where he did not appear anxious to be.

"You don't seem to be quite as ready to meet the giants as one would have supposed," said Sidney Dare, looking back with a sneer. "For a fellow that had the leader of the gang covered, and isn't certain but what he killed a dozen or so of the high privates, you do seem to hang back a trifle hard. Push along, man, push along! You're of more importance in Angels' Flat society than you ever were before or ever will be again. Don't be afraid of a dozen corpses or so."

"That's jest it, boss. I kin slaughter when the blood's hot, but it rattles me nerves offul ter hev ter clean up arterwards. If any one ov you gents 'll berry the stiff I'll give him a quarter, I swear I will."

"Och, quit; yez makes me toired," interposed Ed Cahill, who was along with the front rank. "Av yez wait to foind any corrapases av his makin', it's ould age ye'll die av. I begin to be-lave it's all a flam."

"Which, gentlemen? If you mean the individual known as Bobby Blue-nose, I assure you you couldn't strike nearer the truth if you guessed for a year. If he was hung, drawn, and quartered, he wouldn't get more than he deserves for the little game he tried to set up on me. If his nerve has been equal to his intentions, I don't know what might not have happened. You miserable old scoundrel, what have you got to say for yourself?"

A shout went up, at the tail end of which could be heard Sid Dare's voice as, hat in hand, he bowed low in his saddle.

"Pardon a little enthusiasm, Miss Venner, but we have come out to your help against a gang of ferocious cut-throats, led by a remarkable story told of this antique Bezonian. To find you unharmed is an unexpected pleasure. We understood you were in the hands of outlaws, and that there had been deaths by the dozen. Tell us the truth. The Flat is slow, but it generally gets there. Which way did they go? We may not overtake them, but will shake a lively leg trying."

"I hardly understand you. This ragamuffin is the only outlaw I met, and if he did not rob and murder me it is because, after he had shot my horse, his nerve failed him, and he ran away. What shall I do with you? Hanging is too good for you."

Nobody believed that the little lady could be so savage, or that Bobby Blue-nose could be so much of a desperado. The crowd looked at him curiously.

Bobby himself appeared to be dumfounded. He stared at the woman until his eyes had grown as big as saucers.

"An' do yer mean ter say ez it war all a dream, ez I drempt 'thout knowin' Kerry me out! Who'd a-thunk it? An' me a-pilin' in heavy, a-hopin' ter kerrel that thousand dollars ez Mrs. Johnny Chase was a-offerin' to ther man ez brung yer back."

"Does that look like a dream?"

She pointed at the dead horse, which lay in the trail where it had fallen.

"Robert," said Sidney Dare, speaking very softly, "there hasn't been a vote taken by this court and jury, but, if I'm not very much mistaken, you've got to hang!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BALANCING OF THE SCALES.

"WAIT a moment, my friend. I have a say-so in this matter, and I think we'll have no more executions. Mr. Blue-nose has given me his gauge exactly, and you couldn't find a safer man in all this district to trust women and children with. You see he shoots very straight, and yet is scared of his own shadow. I'll never be afraid to trust him now, though I'll keep a watch on him, and at the first thing that looks like crooked work, down he goes; and he's all paid for."

The little lady spoke as though she meant it, yet she laughed as she spoke; and so broke the horror of the Flat at the base treachery, as they understood it.

It was only just in time that she held up both hands, for the noose for Bobby's neck was already made. A moment's hesitation and he would have gone up the flume.

"You don't mean to say that you're going to let such a bare-faced outrage go?" asked Dare, taken aback by the unexpected interference. "Why, what sort of a reputation would Angels have if it once got out that a man played it so low down as this, and then got out without being any the worse? It won't do, gentlemen. It's a highly proper spirit, and all that; but we've got our reputation to consider. If Miss Venner will please ride on for a few moments, we will join her as soon as we've made satisfactory arrangements."

"But Miss Venner don't please," answered the young lady, sharply. "Who set you up for a judge in Israel? I say, no; and that settles it. Bobby and I are going over to the Big Hope, according to contract and arrangement, and you that are going along fall in behind. Forward, Robert, and show the gentlemen that you are better than you look. I've saved your life, don't you understand? and henceforth you belong to me."

Bobby Blue-nose seemed to have sense enough to comprehend from the first moment that the extraordinary charge was made, that his life was hanging by a thread. A more brilliant man might have tried to argue his case, and so missed it beyond redemption. As it was, he gave a grunt of satisfaction, and snuggled up to the side of his only friend.

"Yer verry squar", miss, but I allow that yer hev made the biggest kind of a mistake, ez you'll sometime or other find yerself ter admit. Ef yer still bound ter go ter ther Big Hope I'm game ter go with yer, when yer ready ter start."

"He talks like a leetle man; let's all go!"

It's not certain to this day who started the suggestion, but it was carried by a unanimous vote; and leaving the little affair, about the punishment of Bobby, for further consideration they all set off, without much explanation of the whys and the wherefores.

It was quite a little army and under fair discipline. They marched quietly, and kept up a rate of speed that covered the distance in a short time.

As they approached the shanty that had been occupied by Simon Venner as his headquarters the young lady inspected very closely the little building.

If she expected to see Johnny Chase's face at the front window she was doomed to disappointment.

Instead, "Elder" McKinzie stepped forward to meet them all.

The "elder" had been Simon Venner's right bower; and he was held to be pretty deep in John Chase's confidence. At any rate, the hard-headed, honest, thorough-going Scotchman was running the mine after his own fashion, now and then reporting his progress to Chase, at other times, did not bother him.

He was ordinarily a very quiet man, believing, with the first poker-players at the Flat, that it was best to let the cards speak for themselves. If he had shut himself up in the shanty, and simply greeted them with a shot-gun, no one would have been very much surprised.

Instead of that, he came out with both hands outstretched.

"Verra glad am I to see the daughter of Simon Venner. Welcome. All that is here belongs to you, and you may take possession at any time, if you are willing to run the risks."

He did not even explain how he knew that she was the daughter of Venner, but shook her hand cordially, in spite of some reluctance on her part, and then motioned to the rest to follow.

The early surrender seemed too good to be true, and it was evident that Miss Venner accepted it with a grain of salt, even before Sid Dare, when he found his opportunity, touched her on the arm, with a quiet wink, as he whispered:

"Eyes open, miss. If there's any money in it, any of the gang would cut your throat, and welcome. There's a game somewhere. There's more than one thinks Johnny had some desperate hold on the old man, or they wouldn't have been so thick all of a sudden. And when he has a square hold on the Big Hope, he's not going to let go all of a sudden."

"Thanks; I understand, and will be on my guard. Can I trust you?"

"To the death, miss."

"To mine, yes—probably; but I hope it won't go quite so far as that. Now that I have got inside, I feel very much like holding the fort for good and all. Will you enroll me an army out of your attendants?"

She smiled as she spoke, but it was after a dubious manner.

With the risk of the chief of Angels' Fat dropping in on them any minute, with the boys at his back, it would require something more than poetry to induce a man to take the position she offered to Sid Dare.

His answer showed that she had been a little mistaken. Without a bit of hesitation, he answered:

"You couldn't offer me a job more to my mind. The Big Hope is yours, and if our friend of the Saint's Rest comes this way, you can expect him to go back feet foremost. It's all settled now. Just keep the elder in play long enough for me to have a word with the boys, and after that he may get up and howl if he chooses to. We've got the biggest crowd. I happen to know that there's not a dozen men on the pay-roll here, and all of them are not around."

"I'll try you, and if you are as good as your word, you won't be a sufferer by it, if money can do you any good."

"And when it can't, you will insure me Christian burial? All right, you will know me better before we get through. Sid Dare is al-

ways around when there's a chance to win big stakes; and if there's only a good, comfortable risk, he enjoys himself way up in the altitudes."

Elder McKinzie had very comfortably given them opportunity for their conversation. Now, as though understanding that their arrangements were perfected, he came back.

"We're a-runnin' the mine for what's in it, miss, but it's not payin' any too well. By an' by, when we get to the bed-rock, it's like to be worth a heap of money. If Mister Chase was just here, he'd take you in. Mebbe ye wad like to see what the hole in the ground looks like."

"Very true, Mr.—ah—McKinzie. I find I am in danger elsewhere, so I have made up my mind to stay here, and, of course, would like to know the ins and outs of my headquarters."

The manager showed no surprise, but without another word stepped away, followed closely by the little lady herself. She was certainly giving Sid Dare all the chance he asked for when she left him and the greater part of the gang at the entrance to the mine, and alone with Elder McKinzie went on with her exploring.

There was a certain stolidness about the gaunt, grim Scotchman that might have been a warning to a less courageous or wiser woman; on this rather remarkable young lady it seemed to have no effect at all. She appeared a little disappointed at what she saw of the Big Hope, no doubt expecting to see a slope cut through walls of solid gold, and all that. When she came out again she looked curiously around—and the first person she saw was Sid Dare.

He held a bit of paper in his hand, and was poring over it in a dubious sort of way, though the puzzled look left his face the moment he saw her.

"Here's something for you, brought while you were gone. It may only be a jest; but I rather suspect that there is any quantity of frozen truth in it."

She snatched the paper from his hand, and gave it a hasty glance.

It was in the shape of a letter, and the writing was fairly good.

"MISS VENNER:—Our turn will come by and by. You would have been worth something pretty to us alive, but since that game was blocked we have figured it out that you are, or will be, worth pretty nearly as much to us dead. We don't hit without warning, and only suggest that the road to Angels has some length; and when you travel it you will find plenty of bushes that will shelter a man."

"Yours, CAPTAIN BLACK."

"Dear me, that seems like a threat; though I assure you that it is not going to trouble me any. This is a regular fort, and I shall sit down and hold it until things are fully arranged. Where is Bobby Blue-nose?"

The question was not altogether a surprise; but its answer, or want of answer, was. He had been in sight but a moment before the boy who carried the note had dashed by with a whoop, casting the letter to the ground. It was even supposed that he was aware of its contents. Whether he had gone off on the trail of the lad, or slipped out of sight temporarily, or made his disappearance for good, was more than any one could say.

"Shouldn't wonder if he was standing in with the gang," suggested Dare. "He sees the game is up here and has slid out before we begin to ask any more questions. Who would have thought it of the old scallywag, anyhow? Didn't think he had nerve enough for anything but to surround bad whisky."

"But there is no gang," put in Miss Venner hastily, and with the first signs of trouble her face had shown.

"At least, he is all the gang that I know anything about. And as for this Captain Black—who knows anything about him? I never heard of him before; did you?"

"Bless your soul," responded Dare, "there are gangs and other gangs. They come to-day, and weren't here yesterday. I've heard of such a man, a holy terror, but not on this trail. I guess this is only a bluff game, though; and it may be that the old man has set it up himself. If he has, we'll know it soon and act accordingly. What's the best thing we can do now?"

"Get under cover, I should suppose."

The answer came after a moment's hesitation, and the reason of it was rather a startling interruption.

There was the faint crack of a carbine, and then the *thir-r-r* of a spent bullet, which dropped almost at their feet with an ominous spat.

"Thar seems ter be music in ther air," muttered one of the Big Hope men, as he sullenly withdrew a pace or two. "Maybe thar is a Captain Black; an' maybe he's gittin' in his work now."

CHAPTER XV.

THE MAN FROM ABILENE.

"I DON'T quite understand this," reasoned Sid Dare to himself. "Who is it wants to keep the girl corraled here? What backing has she, and why did she throw off on Bobby? It looks—I swar, it almost looks as though Johnny Chase was at the bottom of it! Why did the elder turn over everything when she made her appear-

ance, if he hadn't got his orders beforehand? He's not the kind of a man to go back on any one that trusts him; and the men here wouldn't throw off on Johnny Chase—not for coin. She may stay here—she had better—but I don't. I'm going in to Angels and see what's in the wind. You can bet your bottom 'case' there is music in the air, and your humble servant will see who is tuning up the pipes. Ed can run things till I get back. No danger of the little woman getting away."

The "little woman" was evidently contented with the aspect of affairs, and had full trust in McKinzie and the men around her. There were revolvers enough to protect her against an army, if they were used fairly in her behalf; and she acted like one who was both willing and able to take her own part.

McKinzie talked to her as though he was her uncle; the men of the mine looked at her with the kindly eyes of brothers; and the gang from the Flat, now that they understood that Chase was willing, were ready to stand by her like Trojans.

A little body-guard of the latter, with Ed Cahill as their lieutenant, remained; while Dare, with the rest, started for Angels.

They kept a sharp lookout for Captain Black, but saw no trace of him, and got into town long before the usual opening time of the evening exercises.

"All right, is it?" said Poison Pete, coming forward with unusual interest for him. "Ther old man had been givin' it about ez straight ez it's in his natur', eh?"

"The old man would have had a hemp necktie if Miss Venner hadn't taken his part," answered Sid Dare. "It was his job, anyhow, and then his nerve failed him and he tried to lie out. We got it all from her. She's right enough now, though. We left her at the Big Hope with half a dozen of the boys on guard. McKinzie treated her well; and anyhow, we know just where she is, and can put things right home if there's any monkeying, so I'm not afraid there will be any. But Angels' Flat won't be a very healthy stamping-ground for Bobby Blue-nose after this."

"Better tell him so, then, fur he's hyar now. Seen him only a minnit ago, an' heered him a-spinnin' ther same ole yarn over ag'in 'bout them road-agents with masks on, an' all that. Ther boys are beginnin' ter kim in, an' ef yer hedn't arrove he'd had ther bull camp out on ther war-path."

"Has Johnny showed up since this morning?"

Dare asked his question in a more cautious tone. He might be a reckless young man, but he knew Mr. Chase, and that he was equal to his reputation, with an aversion to having his name bandied about in anything like a loose way.

"No; but I guess he'll be 'round ter-night ez usual. It seems a sure ernuf thing that he went over ter Blue Gulch, an' ther boys thinks he's on ther trail ov ther Pistol Sharp ez war workin' roots on him las' night. Yer didn't see nothin' ov him in yer travels, did yer?"

"Nothing. But I'd give something to know just who he is. Maybe you know."

"Jest a whisper—thet mebbe I'll tell yer later. Ef I don't, never mind. He kin talk fer hisself. Ther Flat are goin' ter see lively times, an' don't yer disremember."

The conversation ceased then, and the little party, having answered numerous questions, dispersed to get ready for the evening.

Poison Pete was a good moral barometer, and the events that followed showed that he had not been far wrong in his suspicion.

The curtain would have gone up considerably sooner if the boys could have found Bobby Blue-nose shortly after their interview with Sid Dare. He had been around as large as life just before the party from the Big Hope reached the town; yet a few moments later he disappeared, and no one knew which way he had gone, though the various places around which he might possibly be hanging were visited.

As a drink was taken at each one, there was a little gang that was pretty well exhilarated by the time it stumbled into Johnny Chase's. Though they moderated their transports on entering there, the fire was only smoldering, all ready to break out under a moderate draft.

The draft was some little time in coming. There was nothing but short cards and the usual amount of drinking going on, and all being friends together, there was nothing to start any animosity. It must have been well past ten o'clock when a horse clattered up to the door, and, a moment later, Chase entered the room.

"You didn't get him, Johnny; you didn't get him!" said a rough, ragged voice that scarcely reached beyond Sid Dare's shoulder, and was intended more for an ejaculation than a question.

"Thort yer wouldn't. Ther men ez kin git up afore Snapshot Sam, an' he not wantin' ter see 'em, must rise mighty airly in ther mornin'. An ef yer hed met him yer would 'a' bin a-comin' home another way. Feet foremost they jin'rally brings 'em; an' Sam's a holy terror ter lay out men, ready fur plantin'."

Dare turned hastily around.

The voice was unfamiliar, and he wanted to see its owner.

Without much difficulty he fixed him—a new man.

"My friend, you seem to know a good deal about the stranger; can't you take me in on the ground floor, and tell me just who he is? If he means to run this camp—as it begins to look—we'd like to know whether we are to knock under or all shoot together."

Dare looked keenly at the stranger, as he spoke; and then was silent for the answer that did not come.

The man was almost tall enough for a giant, with hands that were enormous in their size and arms that were wonderful for their length. His hair and beard had been haggled off short, and struck out in a stiffness that resembled a brush of heavy bristles, and his eyes had a peculiar shade that at a little distance made them look like those of a wall-eyed horse. Altogether he was a peculiar, and by no means handsome specimen of the tough citizen, just in from the mountains, and Dare thought that under the circumstances his advent would probably be looked upon with some suspicion, especially if he allowed himself to express his feelings on what was the unpopular side—at the Saint's Rest, at least.

Nevertheless, here was a man that seemed to know something about the conundrum, and Sid Dare decided that if he wished to do it at all he had better cultivate him before he became a man marked for slaughter. He moved a pace or two nearer, and continued in an undertone:

"Go slow, old man. Snapshot Sam is in bad odor here just now, and there is no telling what the Flat may choose to do to a man that knows anything about his antecedents and don't spill it out. If you have anything back about him, you had better spell it out in full, or else keep mighty quiet. If a circus starts once, and they put yer in the ring for a performer, you will find the ground and lofty tumbling act is a rough one when it's done at Angels' Flat."

While he was giving his warning, Sid Dare was watching keenly, as though he meant to read him clean through. The effort was a failure, but the answer was a surprise.

"Waugh! Sid Dare yer call yerself down this way. Back whar they knows yer better, they says Webb Dun when they wants yer ter come to supper. I reckon yer ain't layin' round a no-count camp like this fur nothin'. Hev yer found ther crazy heir ter ther Triplet half mill-yun? See? Mebbe ef yer would hev a bit ov a talk with Sam he'd lay in with yer on that job. What he don't know 'bout things ain't wuth thinkin' 'bout."

"The Triplet fortune! What do you know about it? Old man, you are not what you seem. Who are you? Speak quick. They are already watching us, and it won't do to be whispering together in a corner if we can't tell what it is about."

"Don't worry. I'm a-tootin' me own horn, an' don't call fur no help frum noboddy, an' littlest ov all frum you. When ther time comes you'll hear suthin' fresh, an' ther ole man'll be on ther right side ov ther fenoe. I mout add—look out that Johnny Chase don't drap to ther inside figgers. Ef he does he'll git ter shootin', an' salt won't save you."

"I'll stand my chances," answered Dare, grimly, not too much surprised to make his comments; "but I'd think they were better if I knew just where to place you. If he is working up any kind of a snide game on me, and you are his side pard, I know what sort of a shape it is going to take, and can provide for it."

As he went on talking, his answer expanded into a defense such as he was at first unable to make.

"Abilene Abe they call me hyaraways—ef that does yer ary good, make ther most ov it. Ef yer keep on with yer game, an' I keep on with mine, it's purty sure thet our roads 'll cross; an' then look out fer breakers."

He moved away without giving Dare a chance for further questioning, and it seemed as though the interview, such as it was, had been planned for a purpose.

"Lightning blast him! he can tell a story that will, or would, make a heap of trouble—and that's not the worst of it. If he, or a gang, have their eyes on us, we will have to take a new line. No more chance to do the thing up quietly, but we must throw up our hands or take hold of the chance for as lively a little row as Angels' Flat ever saw. Dog-gone it, the trouble is just going to begin!"

There seemed to be truth in the thought in more ways than one. Abilene Abe had pushed his way forward until he stood just at the shoulder of Johnny Chase, as the latter was speaking to some of his friends in an undertone.

Whether he overheard any of the conversation was not so certain; but Chase noted his presence on the instant and wheeled on him as though mounted on a pivot.

"What do you want here, my friend? There's the bar, and there's the tables. Walk up to the one or the other; or else walk yourself out of the door; I don't like your looks."

"Don't be brash, Johnny. I don't like yourn, neither; but ther Saint's Rest ain't runnin' on looks, it's fur ther publick, wich are partly me.

Ef it ain't, say ther word, an' we'll close the shutters."

"What's that? You don't mean to say you've come in here for a row? If you have, you'll find it's the wrong spot fer that kind of fun. Such men we just pick up and slump out. Are you ready to go?"

The answer was a little too cool, and a little too quiet. It would have put any one on guard, and it acted as an eye-opener on Abilene Abe. He took a quick step backward.

"Don't slute, Johnny, unless you've lost yer sand. I kim in fur 'musement ter night—not fur tearin' down biz. It'll be time ernuf ter draw out yer popguns an' slaughter ther innercents when I've tore out ther tables an' wracked the bar. It would be too low down fur a Greaser even ter git ther drop on a white man afore he fairly begun ter spread hisself."

"You look like an innocent—like a smiling infant—don't you? Big enough and ugly enough to scare an elephant; but here goes."

And without an instant's hesitation Johnny Chase threw himself at the giant, who gave no signs of flinching, though his very first movements showed that he was no expert in the noble art of self-defense. He struck a ponderous blow at the little man; and when it failed to connect his long arms began to swing around like the sails of a windmill.

Any one of the strokes might have driven Chase into the ground if they had landed; and for a little they kept Johnny at bay, while the stranger tore around, shouting and stamping, and making noise enough for a dozen. Then, all of a sudden, with an active spring that no one would have looked for, he threw his arms wide, and flung himself fairly on Chase.

The latter had just time to strike once, and as hard as he knew how.

The blood came spouting out from the nose on which the blow landed, but the rust never wavered. The long arms wound around the little man, and he was lifted from the floor.

"Say yer prayers, I've got yer now!" gritted Abilene Abe, and he whirled the body of Chase up over his shoulders as if about to dash it to the floor.

And just as a suppressed "Ah!" went up from the ring of spectators a man stepped in and let drive a lightning-like blow at the face of the man from Abilene.

"Drop it, pard, drop it," he roared as he struck.

"I'm Plumb Center Pete, an' that's my pie yer' stirrin' yer finger in. You feel me whisper?"

There could be no doubt about the answer, whether it was given in words or not. Abilene Abe staggered back under the blow, his gripe loosened, and Johnny Chase writhed from his arms, just as the sharp crack of a pistol, followed by a low but unmistakably feminine scream, was heard right outside the door.

"Heavens! That is Kate's voice!" exclaimed Chase; and without a thought of the two men he rushed out, followed by about two-thirds of the population of Angels' Flat.

CHAPTER XVI.

ROGET MAKES A MASH.

ERNEST ROGET had his own reasons for refusing to accompany Della Venner to the Big Hope; and they had no connection with the question of what John Chase would think of the intrusion. He had come to the Flat on a quest of his own and he was not the kind of a man to be diverted from it. Pete Blockey had offered to stand his friend, and he had accepted the offer; but as yet he was not in condition to use him, and was not altogether certain that Plumb Center Pete was the man he wanted.

At any rate Pete went one way and Ernest Roget another, shortly after Della and her escort had started for the Big Hope; and the two saw nothing more of each other during the day, though Roget strolled the camp over several times.

He looked thoroughly at his case, and asked no impertinent questions of the people with whom he casually conversed, so that it seemed to him that it would require a pretty shrewd head to guess that he had been looking for any one.

As he sauntered up to Sammy Sanders; at the end of the afternoon, he came face to face with Katrina.

Daylight did not improve her looks; and he had no desire for a second glance, though he felt a twinge of sincere pity for Blue-nose Bobby, whose existence seemed to depend upon his success in paying court to such an outrageous specimen of the fair sex. He thought to himself he would sooner have seen one of the saints from the Rest coming to interview him with a double-acting revolver, when she gave the half-turn that showed she intended to address him.

With a short laugh he nodded his head, and tried to pass on.

Katrina gave a sharp glance up and down the street, to see that there was no one very near to observe them, and then stepped a little closer.

"Ach, mein herr, wos fur you aus kommen? Gleich, go way. Dhis eine schlimmstadt. Shoot, kill—very much bad. So."

The brief earnestness brought the laugh back to his lips.

"Excuse me, Katrina, but as I don't sprachen sie Deutsch, and you don't sprachen sie Englisch, our conversation would hardly be profitable. Much obliged for your warning—and I'll admit that this is a bad town, and no mistake—but I'm in a desperate hurry. Perhaps I'll see you later."

"I dalks him slow, I dalks him purty mooch good, so; but dhere vos no dimes now. For vot you koomes to der Flat? Mebbe old Katrina she knows a d'ing or doo, ven you dells her."

"I came here—well—there's some hundred men around here that you might ask the same question of, and all could give you the same answer. We have noses on our faces, and we generally follow them."

He spread his hands around, and answered in a light and airy way; but he did not deceive her.

"Dot vos vhell enough when you dalks to der poys; put it von't fool old Katrina. She see you ask somed'inkgs vhenaffer you goes; mebbe you ask her she dells you somed'ings. Eh? so."

"I swear, I believe, in the words of the profane, I've made a mash," he half muttered to himself; and then aloud:

"You haven't seen anything of a little, blind angel around here, with a bow and arrow?"

"No, put I've see a man mit a cloob vot dhey gall der vool-killer. He put der choonk out fer der mon vot dalks vot he didn't oughter dalk, und keeps his mouth verschliessen ven it ought ter be vide oben."

"It appears to me that either you are a good angel in disguise, or that you have a dangerous amount of knowledge. I wonder, now, if I could trust you with a question or two, if I paid well for the answer?"

"Dry me."

"Well then, Katrina, I am here in search of a woman, she was coming here; and it seems to me she must be here; but so far I have been able to find no traces of her."

"Her name?"

"Dorris Lake."

"Eh? So. Dot vos pad. You dells me vhy you not go mid der vemale vot ask you dakes her to der Big Hope. Mebbe you vind oud somedings. Vot you vonts mit dot leetle girl?"

"It's a long story and we've no time for spinning yarns. Yes or no. Do you know anything of Dorris Lake; or do you know anything of any young lady being in the place whose name might be that?"

Katrina shook her head.

"Dot young leddy vos der only von v'ot might feel der bill. Vhy you no ask her vedder her name vos dot same?"

"Poof! This is nonsense. Of course I know her when I see her. Miss Venner is som eone else. That will do. I suppose I have reached the camp ahead of time; that is all. Or, perhaps, something has occurred to cause her to change her mind; she may not be coming here at all. If not—so much the better; she will learn the truth all the sooner if she has turned her face Eastward and I will find her there."

The latter part seemed to be spoken rather to himself; and without waiting for any answer he was turning away when Katrina caught him by the elbow.

"Mebbe dot vos so; put don't pe doo sure. Shoost vait a leetle vile in der Flats und Katrina vill see vot she kin vind oud. Vill du kommer dis vay do-night, apoud fier hours from now? Dere vill pe a man around dhen v'ot knows v'ot's goin' on, und ven Katrina says dalk hedhells you all v'ot he knows apoud every poddy. So."

There was no mistaking her earnestness; but whether it was only for the hope of making gain in assisting or pretending to assist in his search, or because she really was interested in it, was more than he could decide. He rather suspected that the man referred to was Bobby Blue-nose; and remembering what Pete Blockey had told him thought it possible that the bumper would be willing to tell what he knew, and would be as likely as any one to know of the arrival of any stranger in the neighborhood.

Running these thoughts over hastily in his mind Roget thought it might be worth while to have the interview, and said as much.

"Rememper dhen, Katrina vill pe apoudt vhen der dime comes. So."

Without waiting for anything further she slipped back into the house by the rear door, while Ernest made his way to the front entrance, half puzzled, half hopeful. It was not much. He had the promise of assistance from a disreputable looking tough like Plumb Center Pete, and had made a confidant of a hag like Katrina. It did not seem very likely that it would amount to anything; and yet if any one could tell anything about the coming and going of strangers, it would be Blue-nose, who had a prying disposition, and plenty of time to gratify it in.

As the object of his search would not be found in places like Poison Pete's and the Saint's Rest, it was no great sacrifice to him to miss the gathering there, and after he had his supper he lounged around the hotel, killing the time as best he might until the appointed hour, or near it.

Then he strolled carelessly out, and looked up

and down the street, as though debating within himself which way he should go.

At the corner of the building he saw a shadowy form, and he moved toward it without any apparent aim.

He had not been mistaken. The waiting person proved to be Katrina, who took a step forward in her anxiety.

"Sh!" she whispered. "Der man no can kommer, du go mit me I brings you mit him, aller right. Kom."

She was so much in earnest that Roget did not hesitate.

In any event he felt as though he ought to be able to take care of himself, and in this matter he was willing to run some risks.

"I think I understand. It might not be healthy for him to appear on the street, the way public opinion is running in Angels. Very well. I will go with you; but don't try any tricks on travelers by the way, either. I'm not quite as green as I look, and you will find that for a tenderfoot I hold mighty straight."

That didn't seem exactly Dutch to the old lady, but it was something she hardly got the rights of, since she answered:

"Yaw, das was better as goot," and then hurried away in the lead.

"Pretty predicament for a young man of my years and education," he muttered to himself, after a moment. A new idea had just struck him. If he was seen, there was little doubt in his mind but what it would be suspected that he was following after the old woman, and thus would become identified with her and her affairs, a thing that he certainly did not wish.

He slackened his pace, and allowed her to get a more pronounced lead, and then sauntered slowly along, at a distance where he could but fairly keep her in sight.

The route led through the camp and past the Saint's Rest. When they had reached the end of the settlement, and a region that was so dimly lonely that Roget shivered in spite of himself, Katrina halted, and seating herself by the roadside, waited for him to come up.

"Well, bring on your man. I suppose this is a wild-goose chase; but I'm ready to take a few chances if I can be of any good to Miss Dorris. You would hardly have brought me here for nothing."

"Mine, mine herr. Id vos der best v'ot I could do. Yonder he is now."

She pointed with her hand, and as Roget bent forward to look, he felt a noose tightening around his throat.

CHAPTER XVII.

KATE CHASE MEETS HER MATCH.

KATE CHASE was seated at her case in her own room. She did not always visit the Rest in the course of the evening, and when she did it was generally at a late hour.

This evening John Chase was away, there was no game running, and the supervision of the saloon was left entirely in the hands of the bartender, until his return.

Some women might have felt a trifle nervous to be alone in that precise neighborhood. She did not. She had demonstrated her ability to take care of herself, and after the lessons that had been ground into their pates by past experiences the roughs of Angels' Flat would rather have tried conclusions with any dozen of the hardest citizens than even to be suspected of a desire to cross the path of one of the Chases.

Whatever she was thinking of her reflections did not seem altogether pleasant, and several times she arose from her seat and walked across the floor and back, with a nervous stride.

"This thing cannot continue forever."

She spoke aloud without knowing or intending it; and at the very first was hardly surprised to hear a very matter-of-fact voice answer her:

"Ye'r' right it can't, marm, an' now's yer chance ter git in outen ther draft. Ther very best thing yer kin do'd be ter knock right under, an' kim along with me."

Somehow or other, though how he came was a mystery, there was a man in the room.

She knew at once, without further question, that he must be a man of sand, or he never would have intruded himself there, where, he ought to know, it was as good as death to be found. Whoever he was he evidently meant business, since he was disguised beyond all present chance of recognition. A cloak, such as she did not remember to have ever before seen, was flung over his shoulders, while an extremely broad-rimmed sombrero shaded his brows and almost hid his face from view.

"Well, sir; what is it?"

The appearance, her thoughts and question, and the production of a revolver all came so closely together that one might have fancied she had been waiting for the interview. Certain it was that the man could not make a movement without her sharp eyes catching it, and she seemed fairly to hold his life in her grasp.

Still, the stranger did not appear at all frightened over the chance of sudden death. He gave no start at the challenge.

"I have come to take you," he solemnly stated.

"There is money in it, and when there is money going you will always find me around. No folly, if you please—if you are wise you will make no sound, but just go along with me."

There was something so cool about the proposition that Kate Chase laughed in spite of herself. No other answer was really necessary, though she had a little piece to speak.

"My friend, whoever you are, you must see that the boot is on the other leg. You are the one in danger, and you it must be to take the orders. Hands up, sir, without a grain of hesitation. I've no use for you, but perhaps John has."

"It's not John's turn, and don't you fool yourself, either," responded the stranger; and she noticed that his voice had totally lost the uncouthness of his first address.

"It has taken some little time to arrange matters, but I think I have them fixed now. John is very busy down in the Rest. In fact he is interviewing a gentleman of nerve at the present moment, and if he gets away with his baggage I'll never back my judgment again for a dime. If you called to him he couldn't come, and if he don't come, you can just consider yourself the property of yours truly."

For the first time Mrs. Chase felt a shiver of apprehension. This man must have some sure card to play or he would not be so deadly cool about it. He was no tenderfoot, and no idiot; and he knew just who he was dealing with.

Still she did not allow herself to show any sign of nervousness. The smile on her lips was real enough to deceive the keenest.

"If you know anything about me you know that I wait for no one, but take my own part, come what will. As I never miss my aim at five times the distance, and have you covered now, I judge I am hardly wrong in saying that when you leave here it will be at the head of a funeral."

Her brow knit ominously.

"Scarcely, my friend. As I said, it has taken some little time, but it is all arranged. The shooting-irons are doctored, and you can pull your trigger till you're tired, and then begin over again. If you don't believe me, try now."

There was a look of sneering insolence in his face as he coldly folded his arms and stared straight at her.

She gave him one more keen glance, satisfying herself once for all that he was a perfect stranger, and then her finger tightened, and the hammer fell.

As she had suspected, the only answer was a sharp click.

And yet there might be a trustworthy cartridge. With the rapidity of a true expert, her thumb and finger worked hammer and trigger till the cylinder had made a complete revolution, and then, as the man gave a mocking laugh, she hurled the useless pistol full at his face.

Her aim and strength were both good, but he was not to be caught in that way.

With a motion of his hand, so deliberate that no one would have thought that it could be in time, he caught the weapon and then cast it aside.

"You have better nerve than I gave you credit for. Most women would at least have screamed, and I rather think I would have enjoyed hearing your voice. Come! you couldn't pile on a little agony? I can't linger much longer over the preliminaries, so if you want to have a chance you had better rustle around lively. Or, are you ready now?"

"In the name of heaven, who are you? Have I ever seen you before? What is it you want? What have I, or we, ever done to you? Answer! You are so certainly a stranger that it seems certain that this must be some ghastly mistake!"

"Oh, no. Everything seems to be going on all right. If some careless fool had left a good cartridge in that shooting-iron and you had been able to drop yours truly, there would have been mistake enough to cry over; but as it is I think you must allow that I shouldn't want things in better shape."

"As to who I am—don't your conscience tell you that? or haven't you got such a convenient thing as a conscience to remind you of the miserable dupes that you have ruined, body and soul?"

The two were really at the same game, though each was so intent on it that the intentions of the other were not observed.

And the stranger was the quickest to act. While Kate was keeping him in conversation, as she tried to make up her mind what to do without calling on the outside world, he was diverting her attention from the real fact that he was slowly but surely edging closer to her. At length, with a sudden spring, he bounded to her side and flung his arm around her, at the same time pressing one hand over her mouth, so that it would now have been impossible for her to utter a scream, if she had wished it.

"That will do!" he exclaimed, in a satisfied tone. "I was afraid I might have some trouble, but I am glad to see that you are a woman

of sense, and are willing to come right along. Good enough! We'll start now, and in the next hour or two you will know all about it."

For boldness the outrage certainly exceeded anything that had ever happened at Angels' Flat, and any other woman would either have shown terror before or given way to fear now.

Mrs. Chase was not one of the giving-way sort, and though she was perfectly helpless in the hands of the man, who seemed to have a grasp of iron, her senses were all about her, even when she felt the folds of a shawl thrown over her head and a handkerchief in some way knotted across her mouth, like a bit, effectually preventing any outcry.

The way in which the latter was done convinced her that the man had a confederate, although she saw and heard nothing of him. Immediately afterward she was raised from the floor and carried lightly away.

It was not very probable that any one would meet them before they got outside of the house, for she was there alone with them, and in their power; but it did not seem likely that, even at that hour, they could transport her through the streets of the camp without attracting attention. Evidently no present harm was intended, and Kate Chase reserved her energies for a struggle when it would be the most apt to be for her benefit.

The house was not a large one, and it required only a few steps to take them out into the open air.

Of course, being completely blinded by the shawl, Kate could not see what was going on, but she could give a pretty sharp guess.

The confederate had slipped out in advance, and now rode forward, coming up almost to the building itself. Then she was handed up, and for a moment the eyes of her captor left her as he swung himself into the saddle.

As she knew something about the other man and nothing at all about this one, it was worth while to test him; so as he settled back, with a quick motion she endeavored to twist herself out of his arms.

Then it was that the pistol-shot came—as much a surprise to her as to those inside the Rest. The arms that had just been about her were thrown wildly up, and she thought she was about to fall to the ground.

But only for an instant; for, as the bandage loosened from her mouth in the struggle and she uttered the cry heard by John Chase and the rest, she was caught up once more, and by the time the crowd burst out, the doubly-weighted horse was dashing madly away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A BAD NIGHT FOR THE FEMALE SEX.

AT the sound of the pistol-shot the crowd, as already detailed, went rushing out.

The first thing they came upon was a man lying huddled up just where he had fallen. He was shot through the breast, and seemed barely conscious. In the distance a horseman was rapidly vanishing.

"Thar they go—thar they go! This hyar war one of 'em, an' I gi'n him his las' sickness; but ther other one war too slick. I didn't dast ter shute fur fear ov hittin' her. Git hosses quick, an' yer kin ketch him yit. He can't go fast, an' ef ye're spy ye're bound ter hev him!"

"Have him! Have who? What do you mean? And who are you?"

The questions were quite natural. Johnny Chase had dashed into the house, and Sid Dare came to the front in his absence. He did not recognize the man gesticulating and shouting so wildly, and of course only guessed at what it was all about.

"It's ther woman he hez—ther Rustler—Johnny Chase's wife—sure ez my name's Bobby Blue-nose! I seen 'em a-comin', an' jist laid low. They was a-kerryin' ov her off, an' when she flopped outen his arms I let him hev it. Git hosses an' folk'r! I didn't dast ter try ther other gerloot, 'cos he'd picked her up, an' I wa'n't clost ernuf fur a sure shot. Bobby's slow, but gi'n him a chance an' he git's thar."

And the old man flourished his revolver and gave a superannuated sort of shuffle, as though overjoyed at the addition made to his record—if he ever had one before.

Meantime, Johnny Chase had satisfied himself with a hasty glance inside, and came rushing out again.

Too much time had been lost already, and he did not give more than a glance at the fallen man. Then he stared around, and his eyes fell upon two horsemen who had been riding leisurely but now quickened their gait to come up with the throng.

Without a word, he sprung at the first one. How it was done was not so clear, but by some dexterous twist or heave the man was unhorsed, and in a second Chase was in his place and flying off, bareheaded as he was.

The man unhorsed fell lightly, and was on his feet in an instant with both hands up.

"Curse you for a dirty hoss-thief. Will yer all stan' by an' see me robbed? After him, Tom. Thar, an' thar!"

He had begun to shoot, and though the first ball went wide, the second would have come a great deal nearer to the mark if it had not been

for Plumb Center Pete, who, darting forward, knocked up the hand of the man.

"Go slow, you thar! Ef you'll jest keep yer linen on, you'll find it's all right and yer critter paid fer. When yer hear ther bottom facks, you'll be willin' ter throw in saddle an' bridle ef they never come back. Ef you ain't, I'll fight yer fur love er money."

The man's companion had already darted off along the trail, while some were straggling off in the rear "on footback," and others were scattering around to look for mounts which were none too plenty in Angels' Flat. Seeing that he could do no better, he listened to a few words of explanation, and was immediately convinced, when he found out who it was that had taken his horse, and why.

Those that had remained behind clustered around the wounded fellow, who had been carried into the Rest—more from a hope of finding out something than from any sympathy. At that moment the town appeared to be solid for the Chases.

Pete Blockey looked around and saw that what might be called the representative men of the camp were all missing. Even Sid Dare had gone on the chase in behalf of the Chases, and Abilene Abe had disappeared, though no one knew in which direction he went. Pete was not troubled with modesty, anyhow, and in the absence of any one more closely interested he came to the front, taking hold of the prisoner in a professional way.

"Mighty bad thing fur you, old man. Ef I couldn't pick a better pard than he was, I'd play a lone hand from A ter Izzard. Who be yer, anyhow, an' what war yer doin' round hyar?"

The man answered with a deep groan. Most likely he didn't hear a word that was said to him, for his eyes had a wandering look, his breath was labored, and his face very pale.

"Can't you hear me, pard?" continued Blockey. "I wouldn't wonder ef he sot ther job up on yer hisself, fur it's too redeckerious fur anything ter try ter think ov ther bummer holdin' straight when thar was a man at ther other eend. You ain't got long ter tarry, an' I think they'd give yer a heap more comfortable place over yonder ef yer spent yer last minnit cleanin' up a snide game like this hyar. What sarter trick was it you war playin'? Speak it slow, an' mebbe we kin understand."

For a moment it looked as though the man was too far gone to understand or to reply.

Then he suddenly broke out in a way that surprised everybody:

"Capt'n Black!" he exclaimed in a thin, shrill scream. "I'll be even with yer yit! It war you done ther job. Yer shot me when I wasn't ov no more use. But I won't die—not till I git even. Lissen, an' I'll tell yer all!"

"That's right, pard. Jest work on that level an' you'll find us all yer frien's, yer solid frien's. Who's this Capten Black, an' what does he want with Johnny Chase's spouse? Whar'll we find 'em, an' how'll we git 'em back? Them's ther p'int's; an' yer ain't too much time ter answer 'em afore yer go over ther range."

"Lissen. I'll tell yer all. Capten Black, cusses on his, is— Ah!"

He never finished his sentence. The fictitious strength left him as suddenly as it had come. He cast his arms up, uttered a horrible, choking sound, and then sunk backward, while his eyes began to glaze, and then there was a rattle in his throat.

"Sorry, gents," said Pete, looking sympathetically around. "I guess we won't find out nothin' more. The man's a-dyin'."

This announcement rather stilled the crowd, for though death was no new thing to those there, and from what little had been learned there was not much call for sympathy; still, it is a solemn thing to watch a fellow-mortal passing through death's portal.

In the hush that followed every one could distinctly hear the rapid gallop of a horse, and the first thought was that probably Johnny Chase was returning.

There was an immediate rush to the door, and then they saw that they were mistaken. Indeed, the horse came from an entirely different direction, and carried but one rider, and that a woman.

There was no need to wonder who it might be. Though the rider was not very well known, yet as she passed the glare of the neighboring lights, almost every one recognized her for Slim Jimmy's cargo of the night before, the little lady who had temporarily halted at Sammy Sanders's, and then gone on to the Big Hope.

"Men of Angels' Flat!" she exclaimed, as she drew in her steed with a suddenness that bespoke a practiced equestrian, "will you stand by a woman?"

"You bet—by two ov 'em ef anybody shows ther chance!"

The answer from Blockey was followed by an affirmative cheer from the crowd, that pushed up closer to hear the story it was pretty certain she was going to tell.

"Spoken like yourselves. Listen to the plain truth, first, and then you will know better what it is that you have to do."

"Quick, an' sharp, then, with the bark all on. This camp war just about settin' out on an ex-

pedition. Ef you've got anything better for 'us ter do, out with it."

"Thanks for the hint; but though I am a woman, I can tell the truth in as few words as the next. Probably you all know that I am the daughter of one of your former citizens—Simon Venner, as he was called here. How he died I know not—nor does any one else that cares to speak on the subject. Enough that he is dead, and that I am heir to what he left behind. Thinking that I should at least make an effort to know the whole truth, I have journeyed thousands of miles, and am here for justice."

"Rah fur jestic! Ef yer don't hev it it'll be 'cos this hyar camp gits left! Don't say nother word, we're with yer. Yer know me ov old!"

The speaker was Bobby Blue-nose; and Miss Venner gave the rough, ragged old man a look of scorn.

"I want men!" she exclaimed. "Not the kind that can be bought for money, but men that will see justice done to a woman, because she is a woman. What little coin I have now I will freely share with you who father my cause; and when I meet with the success that I know will follow I will pay royally those who help me for love now."

"An' what's it all about? It's a pig in a poke yer off'r in marm," interposed Plumb Center Pete.

"It is this. When I went to the Big Hope I was deluded by a false friendliness. I felt it was my place and remained there, surrounded, as I believed, by a trustworthy body-guard."

"Yet I was not altogether reckless of what might happen; and though I trusted my professed friends somewhat I trusted myself most of all."

"It was well that I kept my eyes about me. To-night I discovered, just in time, that I was to be murdered, and my body spirited away. But I baffled them; while they were fumbling at the door of the little office that I had taken as my own den I let myself silently out of the window, with my own hands saddled my horse, and rode away just in time."

"A heap ov pluck in that; but was yer sure they meant it?" persisted Blockey. "How did yer know they were figgerin' ter scoop yer in? Yer can't 'most allus tell."

"How did I know? By this. When, a moment later, they knew of my retreat, the disguise was thrown off, there was a rain of lead following me down the road. I escaped; but I brought with me this. Men of the Flat, won't you stand by a woman?"

As she spoke she held up her bare arm in the moonlight. At the elbow it was rudely bound with a blood-clotted bandage; and at the sight of that a chorus of yells arose.

CHAPTER XIX.

PETE BLOCKEY SKIRMISHES AROUND FOR INFORMATION.

THE stirring appeal, followed by the instantaneous response, seemed well enough in a way, but Pete Blockey, who had asked several pertinent questions already, showed no signs of the enthusiasm that had taken hold of the crowd. On the contrary he drew a little back, while muttering to himself:

"Speaks mighty well fur Angels' Flat but it 'pears ter me they've clean furgot ther other leetle woman ontirely. Ef I know a seven spot high from a royal flush thar's a game somewhere, an' like ez not this leetle bit of calker's in it. Kinder queer, but I don't gin'rally take ther most stock in ther one that yells ther loudest. Who are she, anyhow?"

Chance had brought him alongside of Bobby Blue-nose, and as Blockey was a man who observed everything, there was something about the broken-down old fellow, that attracted his attention. He saw that he stared, rubbed his eyes, and stared again, as though struggling with the evidence of his own senses.

"What are it, Bobby?" inquired Blockey, in a friendly sort of way.

"Ye'r betting yer eyes on her, like a sucker at a country fair. Old friend of yourn, eh?"

"B'lieve me er not, ther's su'thin' mighty cur'us 'bout this," was the answer.

"Ought ter know her. War interdoosed to her by Sammy, this very blessed mornin', an' started ter take her out ter the Big Hope, but—blame my eyes ef thet's ther same woman."

"On, yer must be dreamin', Robert. Didn't yer hear what she said?"

"Yes, an' that's what gits me most ov all. Ef thar ain't some gum-game, don't call me old time rocks ag'in. But, sho! What's ther use? Nobody's b'lievin' me."

"I am, Bobby, ef ye'r tellin' ov a decent yarn. Yer kin guess ther gait I'm willin' ter travel; an' ef yer want a solid friend jest put me up to ther rights ov some sich wrinkle as those, an' mebbe I won't make it wu'th yer while? Honest Injun, are thet ther truth?"

"Hope I may die ef it ain't; an' I ain't shufflin' off ther mortal coil a bit sooner than I kin help. I kin tell a heap; but thar ain't no one ez 'll swaller it."

"Don't fool yerself on that, ole man. Jest kin a leetle outen the draft, whar ther' won't be apt ter be some of these fools a-listenin' ter

ketch on, an' then I kin swaller ez much ez you'll pour in."

Pete was more interested than he let on, and his bantering tone was for an object. Bobby took the hook like a little man, for he seemed more than ever anxious to speak; while Plumb Center Pete kept him going without showing any signs of the inward struggle for credence.

It was not a very long story either, and the first part of it was straight enough, agreeing with what every man in town knew to be a fact. He had gone out of camp as an escort to the young lady who was in search of the Big Hope, had been with her when the three masked road-agents made their appearance, and basely deserted her.

But right there the story began to wander from the accepted version. He declared that he had been so frightened that he hid for hours in the bushes and only entered the Flat after the deputation had left it under his own guidance.

That seemed to be kind of mixed—when he finally found what Angels' Flat really believed. Now, a woman appeared, claiming to be Della Venner, and recognized as her by some of the men who had left her at the mine; but he knew that it was not the same person. What did it mean?

"It means, Bobby, that you got a little too much ov the oh-be-joyful in Johnny's cellar last night. Take the advice ov a man thet's bin thar an' crawl in some's an' git ter sleep. Ef you don't, you'll hev 'em in ther mornin', sure. An' don't be tellin' sich a yarn 'round to ther neighbors. You ain't in no good odor now, an' ef yer try ter make 'em swaller sich stuff they'll hang yer, sure."

"But it's true; every las' word ov it true!" exclaimed Blue-nose, with some warmth. "You said you'd b'lieve me."

"So much ther wuss. Ef I know anything 'bout ther flat, you couldn't find a wuss place ter shoot off ther truth this side ov Hades. Think it over ter-night, dream ov it, and ef it seems ther same way in ther mornin', yer kin whisper it ag'in in ther heller ov my picterful ear, an' I'll see; but don't breathe another whisper of it ter-night ef yer don't want trouble. So long, now. Crawl in somewhar, crawl in, Bobby, er you'll begin ter see snakes."

And Bobby shambled away, apparently about half convinced, while Blockey snapped his fingers with great satisfaction, when the bummer was fairly out of sight.

"Good ernuf!" he muttered. "It does take a durned fool fer wisdom. I kin see a glimmerin' of light at last; an' ther peccoaniary prospects ov this firm are enlargin'. Ef I don't make ther ruffle now, you kin sell my cheek fer damaged brass. I've got him, sure."

The soliloquy of Blockey might have been even more extended had it not been for a sudden interruption.

A hand dropped on his shoulder, and he looked around with a start, to meet the gaze of the man known as Will Kempton.

"See here, old man, what are you driving after?" was Kempton's salutation.

"There's not room in this pie fer more than a certain amount of fingers, and you're a late comer. Don't you think that this camp could wagon along without your assistance? It's sometimes an unhealthy corner of the globe for wandering infants, and I really have an interest in your precious health."

"Thankee. Makes a feller feel good all over ter know I hev sich a friend; but them ez axes sich questions generally hez a six in each hand, an' ther hammers conveniently drawn. What's ther matter with you?"

"Come, now, it's not worth while to ruffle your hackles till you see what's in the pit. Probably you don't know me; but I have you down very fine. You are Pete Blockey, miner, prospector, detective, and occasional road-agent, willing to take a hand in anything that looks as though there might be money in it. You ain't exactly the kind of a man the Flat wants, and if some one was to ventilate your record, there are plenty of men that would be willing to have a back at you the first time they met you in the dark; and a few that wouldn't object to trying it on by daylight. Don't you think you had better emigrate?"

"Well, sea'ssly. It's ez broad ez it's long, an' me hevin' the under hold. Mebbe you think I don't know you an' yer pards? Mou't be better ter sing small an' keep an eye out ter wind'ard, but I ain't them kind. I'm rough an' tough, an' I say what I think. You're axin' my game, but I ain't perpoundin' no questions 'bout yourn—'cos I know it. When Johnny Chase knows ez much, mebbe there won't be a holy ole picnic 'round the camp-ground! Ef not, why not? Now go on with yer sheep-stealin', but ef ther ball opens, I'll drop you, anyhow. 'Mazin' lot ov satisfaction in headin' off a smart chap, wot don't reely know beans when ther bag's ontied."

Kempton got a good deal more than he bargained for. Instead of Blockey cowering before his threats, and offering to compromise, as he had expected, the man showed no signs of anything of the kind, and sent it back with a heartiness that could not be mistaken. He began to hedge a little.

"Oh, well, if you take good advice in that

way, I have nothing more to say. I thought we could have some friendly talk, and that I might put you on a racket that would leave a little swag in your pocket."

"Thankee; but I don't ketch on—not on your end ov the rope; an' ef you'll take ole Pete's advice, you'll let go altergetther ov mine."

For about half a minute it was a question whether Kempton was not going to return the insult with a shot. Prudence, or something else restrained him. He would even have reorganized his pursuit of information had he had the chance, but Blockey swept by him with a scorn that was hard to bear, never once looking back to see if there was danger behind him.

The skirmish was in Blockey's favor by all odds, and Kempton felt it.

"Curse you!" he ground out, but in a tone too low to meet the ears of Plumb Center Pete.

"I thought you were a dangerous man, but I didn't suspect that you were such an infernal fool to boot. If the game was ripe I think I would try a shot anyhow. What would Dan think if he knew what I had said to him? It's always my way, though, to take the bull by the horns instead of dodging behind the nearest fence. We know that he has something in view, and if he has an eye on us we can have an eye on him. But who could have supposed that he was so well posted? He knows me; and I would be willing to bet rocks that he knows the rest of the boys. If he gets in the way we can't be so far away if we drop him. Maybe it's luck, after all, that I had to take a back seat during the evening's exercises. I'll come out all the stronger, now that the toughest part of the work is over. If you'll grin an' bear it, things don't work so badly for the industrious. The great question is, whether this Roget is a pigeon or a hawk. Whatever he is Pete Blockey has him down fine, and is working him accordingly. I wonder how his little game is progressing."

CHAPTER XX.

UNDER A NOOSE.

ERNEST ROGET had hardly been expecting treachery. It had drifted across his mind that the old bummer and the woman might be in partnership to make a stake out of him by giving some bits of false information, and for that he was ready; but he had not believed that either had the courage for anything more pronounced. Besides that, he had put some faith in what Pete Blockey had told him about the disposition of Bobby Blue-nose toward him, and perhaps was trusting more to that than was wise.

At any rate, the rope caught him fairly, and the hand at the other end dragged him off his feet, and the next thing he knew he felt a pair of strong hands at his throat.

"Don't get excited, mister. I know it's rough, but it's about the only way to do business in this heaven-forsaken country—have a dead sure thing on your side, and then the other party may kick if he wants to. Don't make a noise now, or we will have to put on a stopper that will stay."

The hands that had almost choked him into insensibility were removed from the throat of the young man, and he was helped to rise. When he had staggered to his feet he found himself looking into the muzzle of a revolver, and behind it was a burly man, so muffled up that he could obtain no very clear idea of what he looked like in features, though from the smooth style of his voice Roget rather believed that his assailant was different from the average man to be found at the Flat.

"Good enough. There is nothing like getting down to a good understanding at the start. I have a little talk to pour into your private ear, and this is not the place for it. I judge that you will be willing to follow without any further persuasion. If not, let me know right off, and I'll use my arguments without worrying to answer yours. Sabbe?"

Ernest felt that his every movement was watched, and that had he been ever so much of an expert, it would be impossible for him to hope to offer any effectual resistance against this cool Hercules. Without trusting himself to speak, he simply nodded to show that he was ready to obey.

"As I thought—a man of sense. All right! It will be the best for you. Honestly, I mean you no harm. Follow quietly, and we will soon come to an understanding."

Nothing occurred to interrupt, and the two were, before long, out of sight from any casual passers, and ready for their conference.

"You are searching for Dorris Lake," said the stranger, turning fiercely on Roget. "What do you want with her? This is no foolish question, but one in her interests, that she would wish you to answer me if she was here. If you cannot do it satisfactorily I shall consider that you are her enemy, and take my measures accordingly. She shall be protected at any cost."

"And I am not so sure that she would wish to have her affairs discussed before others. What I have to say is for her own ear, and I declare to you that it is worth the hearing."

"Perhaps; but what is Dorris Lake to you? I

do not remember that she ever mentioned you as one of her friends."

"Probably not, as I doubt if she remembers of my existence, except in a general way. All the same, it has happened that I know of hers, and take an interest in it. If you can lead me to her I'm sure that neither of us will regret it in the hereafter."

"You may have just a shade of time to alter that opinion. We seldom sling a man off in cold blood, without giving him time to say his prayers, but if we find that you have been trying any games on us, look out. There will be very little mercy, even in Dorris Lake. Are you willing to take your chances?"

"Most certainly. I decided on that before I put my head in the lion's mouth. I would hardly have come this far if I had been afraid."

"You have your choice. If you can do your business with me, and I find it is of no importance, well and good. I can swear you to secrecy and let you go. If you once get into the inside of our world it will be too late. If you are not worthy you never can be allowed to leave it. If, after that warning, you still wish to see Dorris Lake I will place you face to face with her; meantime, at the least suspicion of treachery I shall kill you instantler."

"See here. I came to do Dorris Lake what I supposed to be a favor. Chance has given me some information which, if she is like other women, will be of value to her. If she is not like other women—if she has got beyond the point where information can be of use—tell me at once. A man may be a fool now and then, but I am not so infernal a fool as not to be willing to own up when I find it out. Show me that she is beyond hope or help, and I have no more to say. I will go back to the Flat, and leave by the next stage."

"You are a cool hand, but it's too late," responded the other, in a suddenly altered tone. "What do you suppose she would say if I let you go without giving her a chance to hear what you have to say? Oh! you don't know her as well as I do, or you wouldn't be suggesting a thing that I wouldn't dare listen to. You mean business, and so do I. I think I will risk it. If you have the nerve to follow it out, it won't take long to get to the bottom of it all. But don't forget that I'll keep you covered. If you have any crooked scheme, you'd better do it. Keep quiet now. I'll give you a ride for your health."

It was hard to tell if the tones of the man had grown friendlier. At any rate, he gave a peculiar whistle—several notes several times repeated—that were answered faintly. In a few moments they were joined by a horseman, leading two horses.

"The young lady will appreciate your efforts. She is not exactly within speaking distance, but it will not take long to reach her. Mount and away."

Roget crawled into the saddle without a word. It was possible that he had some hopes of dropping out of line and making his way back to Sanders.

If he did have such an idea, he found no opportunity to carry it into effect, since the two riders silently placed themselves on an either side, and all that he could find to do was to keep going. There was more threat in the silence than if a brace of loaded pistols had been put to his head.

Something of a journey followed, that confused and perplexed him. In half an hour of rapid traveling the turns and twists threw him so far out that he had no idea of where he was, or in which direction lay the Flat. In the end they turned sharply and plunged into a little dingle, that was if anything more lonesome and shadowy than the trails they had followed.

"Here we are; tumble out of your saddle," was the brief order as they came to a halt.

"And Miss Lake?"

"Oh, she's not here yet; I am going to bring her. Takes a lot of mighty close figuring to get everything in shape. I've got to make another trip to Angels' Flat, and if anything happens to me the boys will treat you right. If all goes well, as it must, you will have to talk when I get back. Make up your mind what you want to say."

To Roget's bewilderment, he was left there in the semi-darkness. No word of warning was given him, but a man at his shoulder, with a cocked revolver, really was warning enough. He didn't ask for any other, and the man had nothing to say. The probability was that he was put there to do, and not to talk.

Even now Roget was uncertain what this all meant. He had been deftly disarmed, and sat there with his head between his hands, waiting and thinking, since he was powerless for anything else.

His patience had long been exhausted and his prudence was gradually oozing away, when he heard the rapid gallop of a nearing horse, followed soon by a low challenge.

In the dingle it was too dark to see with any distinctness half a dozen yards away, and he was only sure of the return of his captor when he heard his voice.

"Good boy! you are there, are you? Right

enough. I am sorry if I kept you waiting, but I hope you have been improving the time, thinking over your story."

Roget had been considering that for some time; but what he now saw disarranged his set speech entirely.

A woman was there—but she seemed a captive like himself.

There was the sudden flare of a match, as the new-comer dismounted, and Roget saw by the flame a female face. It was one that he certainly remembered, though there was a look on it that he had never seen there before, and hoped never to see again.

What it was he did not understand then, and scarcely gave it a second thought. One could expect almost anything under the circumstances.

Of one thing only was he certain. The woman before him was Dorris Lake—and it was the woman that was known at the Flat as Kate Chase.

"This is the person, I believe," said the man who was engineering this strange meeting.

"At least I felt so sure of it that I took the trouble and risk of bringing her here, where she could listen to you without any disturbing influence. She will hear with interest, and after that have something to say to your humble servant. Proceed."

The semi-introduction was performed in a careless way and the man then took a step backward, and waited for the conversation he seemed to take for granted would immediately follow.

His manner might have provoked a saint, but had no perceptible effect on Kate Chase, who appeared to care nothing for either.

"You are entirely too anxious," retorted Roget, turning sharply on his captor. "Perhaps this is Miss Lake—perhaps not. In any event it does not look as though you were so completely in her confidence that she would desire you to hear what I have to say. The revelation must take its own time, unless you can satisfactorily explain the meaning of all this. Who are you, sir? Who are you?"

The man uttered a short, hard laugh.

"Ha, ha! The boy wants to put on frills! Who am I? Suppose I told you a dozen times over, how would you be any the wiser?"

"Then, if we are such thorough strangers, I can't see any use in carrying on this conversation longer. If this is Miss Lake, I am truly sorry for her; and that I can be of no service. My stock of coin is limited, but I shall be happy to leave it in your hands; and if you will only give me reasonably plain directions to the nearest camp—or to Angels' Flat—I will not trespass a moment longer on your hospitality."

"That is the way I like to find a gentleman—cool as a cucumber. All the same your coolness will do you no good here. We are after information, which we will have, and you may be thankful that we are. I would have no more hesitation in twisting your neck than that of a chicken, but so far in life I have been a pretty square man. When a fellow opens up to the bed-rock I never kill him—unless I find that safety requires it. Now, I have every confidence in your word, so that when you pledge it, after you have told Miss Lake and myself all that you know, I shall start you safely on the return trip to Frisco with a consciousness that you have redeemed your pledge to old Harmon Lake, and done all that he asked you to do, or the case required. I'm not going to twist your neck; and you are going to talk."

"In your mind, perhaps."

For a greenhorn and a tenderfoot, Ernest Roget showed a good deal of nerve. What answer he would have had to his sneering response is hard to tell, for it was interrupted before the first word was fairly spoken.

"One moment, if you please. It is not at all necessary for you to watch me so closely. I have no intention to attempt an escape at present. I am interested in hearing what this gentleman has to say. He is not altogether a stranger to me, by the way; but I know no reason why I should risk his life for a sentiment. If he will speak out he can be sure that I will hear; and for the others, if their ears are as long as I think they are, they may listen and welcome. I will chance the information they gain being of any use to them."

"Are you in earnest?"

"I certainly am, and if you know what is good for you, you will speak."

"Not in the darkness, then. I will know who I am supposed to be talking to."

"Young man, you are talking to Captain Black, if that gives you any definite information; and as for a light on the subject, I see no reason why we should not humor your whims. There! Does that suit you any better?"

He snapped his finger and thumb and on the instant another match was struck and a torch was blazing, that fairly illuminated the little dingle.

"Decidedly better. And now, as my story may take a little time in the telling, suppose we make ourselves comfortable. With my back against yonder rock, I won't feel that crawling sort of sensation that makes you certain you are going to be shot from behind. And don't you think, as the weapons are all on your side,

that you might dispense with some of your attendants? Really, the fewer know the inwardness of the case, the better it will be for the balance concerned."

He waved his hand toward the half-dozen dark forms that were clustered near.

"Perhaps you are right; but before we seat ourselves—a moment. Number One, fix a rope where, if it is needed, it will do the most good."

In response a man stepped forward and flung a lasso over a convenient branch, the outlines of the noose at the end of the cord being fairly visible in the glare of the torch.

"Now, fall back, all of you. If there is any circus you know what to do."

And under the dangling noose, and faced by Captain Black with drawn revolver in his hand, Roget began his story.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MESSAGE FROM THE DEAD.

"PERHAPS I don't know as much about the real inwardness of Miss Lake's affairs as you do; and unless I am a good deal mistaken there are some things that can be said which she wouldn't care to hear repeated.

Kate Chase interrupted him impatiently.

"Don't waste time with your preliminaries. Say what you know, and everything you may have heard. No doubt there is a big mistake somewhere; and it's the truth only that will show it. Anyhow, he will get it out of us one way or another.

"I understand that; so, if I blacken the character of the dead it will only be as truth requires it, and if I make any mistake, I want you to understand that it is not my fault. I know but little, and put little confidence in what I have heard."

Under the circumstances some such saving explanation did not seem altogether out of place. The listeners nodded gravely as Roget went on.

"I was not a man of any particular importance, you understand; and Harmon Lake told me what he did because there was no one else to listen. It was just chance that I knew who Dorris Lake was—if I had not done so he would have had to talk all the same. You know all about him?"

As he spoke he turned to the woman, and she gave an affirmative nod.

"I picked up a man dying on the street and helped to carry him into a druggist's. Two or three men aided me until I had him under the hands of a surgeon; and then went away. There was a hole in his breast that was letting the life out. I knew that in spite of anything we could do he was not long for this world; and, when he spoke a few feeble words, that he was aware of it himself.

"Turn them out and give me some more brandy," he gasped. "I haven't much time to spare, and what little I have I must use to the best advantage. I can trust you—I must trust you—and there is half a million in it. Quick! the end may be nearer than we think."

"It took a minute or two to get the crowd away, though they went readily enough when they understood that it was the wish of a dying man. Then I turned back and saw that in spite of the stimulants they had been giving him he was going fast.

"You are Ernest Roget?" he said, without any preliminary remarks.

"I was surprised that he recognized me, but I simply said that I was.

"Then you know Dorris Lake?"

"Again I assented, adding briefly that I had met her incidentally, and could barely claim an acquaintance.

"No matter. You can find her if you will. Will you undertake it for five thousand dollars?"

"I am not a rich man at present, and you can be pretty sure I answered yes, as I would have done any way. Then I added:

"But I have no idea where she is at present."

"You will find her at a mining-camp called Angels' Flat—or near that. She may be in disguise, but you will know her anyway. When you see her tell her that Harmon Lake is dead and that she is released from her oath; but to beware. They have killed me—they will try to kill her. Let her protect herself and avenge me. Now, get the check-book out of my breast-pocket and fill yourself up a check quickly for five thousand dollars."

"He talked low and stopped to gasp from time to time; but his mind was as clear as a bell. I filled up the check, and with trembling, almost nerveless fingers he put his signature to it.

"He was just in time with it, too, for hardly had he done so when his strength left him, and the end came very soon."

"That check—have you got it yet?"

Captain Black asked the question with more eagerness than he had yet shown.

"You can bet your bottom dollar I had it cashed the moment after bank opened in the morning, and that it is safe where you won't get it," was the fearless answer. "I don't usually send a boy to mill, and, live or die, I am the unexpended balance ahead. I have now com-

pleted my mission, and as far as I know have nothing more to say. I hope I have satisfied all parties. I might add, however, that I attended the funeral, at which no other mourners appeared. How does all that strike you?"

"As a lie out of the whole cloth. If you imagine that I can be deceived with such nonsense as that you are more fool than I took you to be. I think perhaps the best plan would be to give you a chance to tell Dorris Lake just exactly what you want to tell, and then for us to force the truth out of her. If I had not believed you to be a man of sense I would have taken that course in the start. What do you think, Mrs. Chase?"

The little woman drew herself up, shut her lips tightly and stared at him with glittering eyes; but her lips did not move, and from between them there came no sound.

There really seemed to be more in the story of Ernest Roget than appeared on the surface; and the important question was, whether he himself could read between the lines.

Captain Black did not seem at all troubled by the silence. He was thinking so deeply that it is doubtful if he noticed it.

Suddenly his decision was made. He snapped his fingers sharply, and immediately one of his men appeared.

"Let down the rope a little," he said. "I think we will have to use it, after all."

"You can use it," interposed Roget; "but it will do you no good. I have told you all the words that passed between Harmon Lake and me; and if there is any hidden meaning to them I cannot explain it, though I suspect that you can."

"You haven't blackened the character of the dead, as you hinted you were going to do; and you don't seem to have made a mistake that amounted to a cent. Fact is, I'm tolerably well satisfied with you, after taking a second thought over the matter, and you may as well try a back seat. I propose now to deal with Mrs. Chase—unless she heads off the move by dealing with me."

"But what more do you want?" asked Roget, a little anxiously. The deliberate manner which Captain Black had assumed, pleased him far less than his threats and bluster.

"I want to know who Harmon Lake really was. This young lady knows; and this young lady must talk. Here! One of you men come and hold a shooting-iron to his head. If he tries to squirm, pull the trigger. He's paid for."

With wonderful promptness the cold muzzle of a pistol-barrel was placed where it could do the most good. At the same time Roget saw the noose slipped over Kate Chase's head, and adjusted around her neck.

"It is scarcely worth while to say much more, until your mind has been thoroughly impressed with the earnestness of my purpose. I know that the wife of John Chase is not an ordinary person, and so I don't think of treating her like an ordinary woman. Up you go."

He gave a wave of his hand as he concluded, and without a moment's hesitation she was drawn up two or three feet into the air.

The woman had certainly marvelous strength of nerve. She never winced or gave a sign of asking for mercy, but went straight up, with as little resistance as would have been shown by a corpse. Her shoulders were slightly shrugged, somewhat relieving the strain on her neck, but it was certain that a very few moments of that kind of suspension would put an end to her existence altogether.

Ernest Roget crouched with lips half-open and his face full of the horror that he felt. There was nothing he could do or say that could help the woman; but just then he was swearing that if life was spared him after that night he would yet claim and have his vengeance for the wicked work he was witnessing.

And still he did not believe the intention was to slay—as yet. That would defeat the object in view. Somewhere there must be wealth, and to gain it of what value would a dead woman be? It was the cold, unrelenting cruelty of the thing that froze him most.

The man at his back seemed to be affected the same way. Although Roget could not see him, he felt in some strange way that the thoughts of his guardian began to wander, and for the moment his own were diverted from the swinging woman, just as she began to writhe painfully.

"Better death than to stand this till the end comes. I believe he means it, and I'll at least do what I can. If it is my time to die cowardice won't save me, and it will be death to Dorris Lake."

He was sure that the muzzle of the pistol no longer pointed straight for his brain, and though the hammer was back, he had the chance, if luck did not fail him. With knives and pistols he did not profess to be an expert, but with muscle and brain he knew that he could make a better showing than these men of the mountain suspected. There had been a contemptuousness in their treatment of him, as though he was little more than a spoiled child, and he was not half-sorry that he had what seemed to be a chance to show how much they had been mistaken. With a sudden dart he reached upward and caught at the wrist of the hand that held the revolver, and

at the same moment threw himself backward and gave a powerful wrench.

The attack was so sudden and unexpected, his previous attitude had so thoroughly deceived the guard, that the attempt proved a complete success. He fairly flung the man over his head, by a quick movement snatching the revolver from his loosening grasp. Then he bounded to his feet, and threw up the weapon. He did not notice, in his excitement, that, as he wrenched the pistol from the grasp of the guard, the hammer fell, and a sharp report echoed through the dingle.

It would have taken a quicker hand than his to get a snap-shot with any hope of the bullet going home. The torch went out, the darkness came down once more, thicker than ever, and for a moment all that Roget could hear, as he listened with bated breath, was a sound as though the rope that suspended Kate Chase had been suddenly loosened and she had fallen heavily to the ground.

CHAPTER XXII.

ROGET GETS AWAY WITH THE BAGGAGE.

WITH the extinction of the torch and the fall of Mrs. Chase, Ernest Roget's intentions changed. He hastily thrust the revolver into his boot, and stooping low, sprung forward. In the darkness he was afraid to shoot, but since his first movement had been so successful, he did not intend to desert the woman, to meet whom he had journeyed so many hundred miles. With success, too, his courage rose, and though he saw no present way open to escape, he trusted to the inspiration of the moments as they came, and the luck that had begun to run his way.

There was another sound, a moment later, that he did not hear. It came from without, and as yet was barely audible, though it attracted the attention of Captain Black, who was just too cool for his own good.

Kate Chase lay motionless, and two or three of his men had darted forward to throw themselves on Roget, so he could turn to what might be a more pressing danger.

He gave a step in the direction of the noise. In Roget's brain there remained a picture of everything as it was when the light went out, and strange as it may seem he was more at home in the dark than any other man there.

By instinct and a little lucky judgment he reached Kate Chase's side, and barely pausing to stoop he flung her over his shoulder and then dashed noiselessly on. He was not sure, but it seemed to him that right behind where Captain Black had been standing was the nearest and the surest way out of the dingle.

Once more grasping the revolver in his hand he pushed on, intending to try a snap-shot at close quarters, and so clear the way.

But the movement of the captain had opened the road, and Roget was not too excited to take it as quietly as possible, while the howl that suddenly arose from the spot he had just left attracted attention in that direction, so that it was not strange that he slipped out unnoticed.

Had he delayed for a moment, to bother with the man he had helped to an ugly tumble, he would never have got away at all. Two men flung themselves forward, and as they took hold of the first human being they met, and took hold to keep, it was only chance that they did not slay as they came. Anyhow, there was a yell, a confused struggle, and then the unlucky outlaw was stretched senseless by a heavy blow on the head.

"We've got him, captain," growled one of the men in an undertone.

"Keep him, then, and hold your infernal jaws shut. There'll be more fun than pleasure if the fellow that is coming hears a whimper. Lay low, in the fiend's name, and let him go on if he will. What cursed fortune ever put him on this trail—though I might have known the hound was hard to throw off the scent. Hush!"

The sibilant order was scarcely needed now, since the sound of hoof-strokes came quite plainly to every ear, the immediate result, however, being the tightening of the gripe on the neck of the senseless ruffian. If he didn't die from it then and there it was because his time had not quite come yet.

Meanwhile Roget, with his burden lying limp and apparently lifeless on his arm, staggered on making his way blindly in the dark. He had no idea of where the path would lead him, though it seemed, by turning aside, almost anywhere, from the narrow trail he was convinced he was following, that he could, at least until daylight, hide away from his pursuers. He intended to try it, anyway, when the time came; but for the present he desired to get away as far as possible from the spot where he had left the cold captain.

It was wearisome work, well calculated to try his nerves as well as his muscle, and after a while, when he would have sworn that he had been running for half an hour—though really he had not got very far from the spot—he halted for a brief resting-spell, as much as to see if his burden showed any signs of reviving from the long faint which was beginning to frighten him.

Gently he placed her on the ground, and not daring even to strike a match, he placed his ear

to her heart to see if he could catch the sound of its sluggish motion; and lightly he touched with his hand her face and throat.

As he stooped over her he was startled at feeling a hand laid upon his shoulder.

The touch was so unexpected, and he was so little used to weapons, that he forgot the revolver.

Lucky was it that it was so, for an instant later he heard a whisper at his ear:

"Go slow, sonny, and you'll find a friend. I was layin' 'round, waitin' fer a chance ter sail in lemons; but this hyar way's twicet ez good. We kin giv' 'em ther grand slip afore they know which way we've gone. Foller me, an' ef anybody kims up from behind let him hev it fur all that you've got on board. I'll bet all ther rocks thet you kin kiver thet you won't hit a friend."

"But you. Who are you? Why should I trust you? You may be as bad as those from whom we have just escaped."

Roget hesitated, though really he was inclined to believe that this man who had come to him so opportunely was indeed a friend.

"You can't do much better, though you think you've got me kivered with that gun. I'm a white man, an' don't yer furgit it—Snapshot Sam, from 'way down—an' when I chip, I'm all there to stay. I've been watchin' ther performance fur some time, an' war jist ready ter begin work when you give yer start. New, dry up on ther chin-chin, an' let me take ther little woman onder my wing. I reckon you ain't jist so used ter this sorter work, an' I'm at home."

"Be careful—she may be dead."

"Ef so it won't hurt her; an' ef not, it'll be all the better. Come."

Ernest had returned the revolver to his boot-leg, and was ready to obey. This cool stranger evidently knew more about the ways of the West than he did; and until he proved himself a traitor he might as well be doing the work of the firm. With Kate Chase over his shoulder Snapshot Sam strode silently away.

He had a wonderful knowledge of the location, for he never once hesitated, and never once took the wrong road. When they had been plodding along for perhaps five minutes then rose behind them, sharp and quick, a regular fusilade of firearms, that made them halt on the instant, though they were well beyond range.

"What is it?" whispered Roget. "They can't have discovered us."

"No, but you bet Johnny Chase hez diskivered them. There'll be several sweet notes in ther air, fur he's a holy leetle terror when he gits started, o' I do hev ter say it. Guess he kin take keer ov hisself, an' kaliker hums fu'st, er I'd go back an' chip in. Anyway it gives us a chance w'ich I reckon we won't be slow ter ketch on to."

Chuckling to himself over the imagined fun he was leaving behind Sam again took up the line of march.

"And you think that is Chase?" queried Roget, his ear turned back to catch the sounds of rapid firing.

"Don't think—I know it. Oh, I know Johnny ov old, though he's furgot me; an' yer couldn't fool me on ther sort ov work he puts out."

"And where are you going now? We must halt long enough to see whether Miss Lake—"

"Wait."

"The lady you are carrying, then—is alive or dead. I can stand it no longer."

"Oh, brace up an' have some style! It'll only be a minnit er two, an' then you kin sit down to it. Thar's a spring nigh to this, an' when we git thar you'll find her right side up an' no bones broke."

"Hurry, then!"

"All right. I'm a-hurryin'."

The cool way he took all concern for Kate Chase was aggravating, but at the same time somewhat reassuring, and in a very few moments events showed that he had not been mistaken.

As they halted at the little pool of water he had spoken of, they heard a low gasp, and Sam felt a tremulous motion run through the body on his shoulder.

"Didn't I told you so? A woman's a mighty hard thing to kill when she has grit, an' this one's all steel nerves an' chilled-iron muskels. Better, marm? Glad I see yer well."

While he was speaking he was bathing her face and neck with water from the pool, finally dropping a little between her lips from the palm of his hand.

"Sorry, marm. It's not often I'm caught 'thout a leetle ov ther ardent; but ther flask's empty, an' ther facilities fer mixin' a Arizony cocktail are at a discount, so you'll hev ter take ther water straight."

The water had its effect. She swallowed it slowly, and then braced herself up.

"Where am I? What has happened?"

The question came out in a wandering way, more to herself than the rest, but Sam answered promptly:

"You're right in town, sence you've struck me. When I heard a glimmerin' ov what hed happened, I rioted 'round till I got ther rights ov ther t'ing, an' then lit out. Johnny must hev gotten off ther track consider'ble, fur he war monst'us late a-comin'; but we'll strike him afore we git back to ther Rest, an' he kin tell

yer what luck he had evenin' up. It would 'a' done yer soul good ter hev seen him goin' fur that gang—an' they fools ernuf ter give him flashes ter shoot at!"

Kate Chase grew stronger rapidly. The words of the Pistol Sharp stirred her deeply. She sprung to her feet, her hand going by instinct in search of the weapons that were no longer there.

"Ah! I remember—the villains! the dastardly cowards! I must go back and help him!"

"Not a bit er use. He won't more ner empty his droppers afore he falls back, an' we'll strike him on ther road. It's me that's talkin'—Snapshot Sam, ther Pistol Sharp frum 'way down."

"Yes, I understand now—more than you think, perhaps. Back—back to the Flat! there's half a million there, and this is a scheme to win it—but, by Heaven! they shall not while Dorris Lake lives. Back! There will be wild work—there will be murder there!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CYCLONE REACHES MICKEY O'BRIEN.

THERE was no mistaking the excitement of the ordinarily cold woman. Her eyes flamed on them in the dark like those of a tiger and her strength all came back to her.

Snapshot Sam did not appear to be much moved by the wild appeal. Whether he had already ciphered it all out and had his plans laid accordingly, or whether he fancied after all that she was more intent on securing his aid to reach the Flat than anything else, he did not allow himself to be thrown off of his base by the mention of the princely fortune that was at stake.

"Don't spur a willin' hoss an' ther chances are yer'll git thar all ther sooner. In course I count on gittin' back ter headquarters soon ez I kin, an' all we're a-waitin' fur are fur you ter git yer second breath. Thar's a hossout yonder in the timmer, an' ef yer think I kin leave yer long ernuf ter prance out ther gay Bucephalus I'll bring him up fur yer ladyship ter mount."

Kate Chase looked sharply at the speaker; but had the light been ever so bright she would have seen nothing but the most perfect good faith in his eyes. As she was at best helpless in his hands she checked the mad answer that rose to her lips, and simply said:

"Go."

Without further explanation the Pistol Sharp turned away and in a minute was lost to sight, though they could hear his cautious footsteps dying away in the distance. When it was certain that he was beyond earshot Kate Chase for the first time turned to Roget.

"Do you think you have done damage enough, or do you want a chance to work more? Perhaps you thought it was all a pleasant bit of amusement back yonder, but when you go through with it you'll find that it takes nerve to look over the range without making a sign. What more have you to tell me? If it is worth the sacrifice, I may even yet forgive you. Answer me, quick."

"I told you all that Harmon Lake said; what more did you expect?"

"And do you mean to say that you came three thousand miles to say that Harmon Lake was dead, and that I was released from my oath? Of course I am. I knew that long ago. I swore never to touch a penny of the thousands so long as he lived. Now, it is different."

"I've told you all he said; but there was something he did that I thought I might as well mention now, though I passed it over a bit ago. There was an order for a box of papers, which I was to deliver to you personally. I got them from the bank when I had my check cashed; and he said that while the package was of no great value, it would probably be some satisfaction for you to receive it."

"And this package! Where is it? Do you mean to say that you have left it at the Flat, where the first prying eye may recognize its importance?"

"I don't see that I had any choice. If I had carried it with me, I guess Captain Black would have been rejoicing over its contents now. He was careful to tell me that if it was lost, it made no great difference, except that it might save lots of trouble if you had it in certain contingencies."

"And you know nothing of what it contained?"

"Nothing. How could I? Would you expect me to break the seals?"

"It was like him," answered Kate bitterly, "and like you. Half a million in the box, and you using it for a football. I know if you do not. I had sworn never to touch it while he lived—it had worked harm enough already. But to lose it now! Hush."

Roget heard her in astonishment, uncertain what to believe. While he was trying to puzzle out a meaning, Snapshot Sam returned on the back of a mustang that he had concealed not far from the spot.

"Now, leetle woman, ef yer think Angels' Flat needs yer so mighty bad, an' that you kin find yer way back alone, jest crawl up. When you git thar you kin whisner thet we'll be 'long soon ez it's convenient. Ef that don't suit 'em,

let 'em turn out an' rustle 'round till they strikes us—er suthin' else. Off you go."

Without thanks or leave-taking, she was in the saddle and away like the wind, heading straight for the camp in the distance.

"Bright leetle female, t'at are," said Sam, as he turned to Roget. "Yer needn't look so ail broke up. You'll see her ag'in, long afore yer ought ter. A very neat leetle lit ov dry-goods she are, but dangerous ez dynamite ter fool 'round, ez mebbe Johnny Chase may find out."

"Yes," answered Ernest, with a half sigh. "But I don't wonder she thinks I am a coward. I half think so myself when I remember how I sat there and saw the villains torture her. If I had been half a man I would have—"

"What? Jest quit, yer make me tired with that stuff that's all in yer mind. I couldn't 'a' done it better meself, an' I'm a jedge ov sich matters; she knows it, too, an' she knows you'd break yer neck ter serve her, more fool you. It takes time fur a man ter grow up with this country, but you've started out first chop, number one, and by and by you'll be so big the land won't hold you. You kin go ter sleep on that, now, er you kin stumble on in ther dark alone towa'd Angels' Flat, er you kin go along with me, an' see ther fun at ther Big Hope. But make up yer mind mighty quick. I ain't got long ter tarry. Thar's more dry-goods in trouble thar!"

There seemed little choice among the evils presented, and yet Roget made up his mind almost on the instant. Misery loves company, and to be with even this desperado was better than being alone. After what had been done he could hardly suspect that Snapshot Sam had any sinister motives toward him.

"I go with you because I can do no better—and because I felt interested in the woman who so recklessly thrust herself into danger among the ruffians at the mine. If we can do no more for Dorris Lake—"

"Meanin' ther rustler, Kate Chase."

"Yes, as that is the name she seems to go by here. If we can do no more for her, let us help the other. And while we go along perhaps you can explain how it comes that I find her in league with such a desperate man, and hunted by such desperate men."

"Ther bud's expandin'; ther tenderfoot's branchin' out inter a bad man from Bedie. Good enough! I'll load yer so full ov p'inters an' information that they'll think you're a holy terror frum 'way back. Did yer hear her whisner thet thar war half a millyun in the pct, an' somebody hed wrung in a cold deck?"

"Something of that kind."

"Well, that's solid, gospil truth, pressed down an' runnin' over. Only she hez ther wrong cut by ther tail."

"And the men we rescued her from? Has Captain Black as much knowledge of this hidden bonanza as you seem to have?"

"He tried ter make her talk, an' missed ther turn. Don't thet say enuff? It's a long story, an' I don't feel like shootin' it off at every man ez comes askin' questions; but I don't mind tellin' you a thing er two. Hold hard. Thar he comes."

With a quick movement Sam drew his companion back into the shrubbery that lined the dim trail, and just in time. Hardly had they hidden when a horseman dashed past them, going in the direction taken by Kate Chase.

"I don't ginnerally hide from a dozen; but when it suits my band I put my pride in my pocket. Go ahead, Johnny Chase. Ther cirkiss will show at ther Flat, an' you may ez well be puttin' up ther canvas till we come in with ther band wagon."

Roget could almost imagine the Pistol Sharp shaking his fist after the flying horseman, there was so much good, sound hatred in the low muttered tones, but before he could ask any questions he was pulled out once more into the road. Then, and without a word, Snapshot Sam hurried him away in the direction in which the Big Hope was supposed to lie.

As his guide was resolutely silent, except when, now and then, he gave a low but gruff rebuke for not proceeding with more caution, and as the way was strange, rough, and, as far as he could judge, likely to be long and dangerous, Roget did not have a very comfortable time. Yet he kept on doggedly, determined to see the end of the adventure, since there was nothing else he could do.

It was a little darker than usual now, and for some moments they had been creeping through a labyrinth of rocks and trees. Suddenly Sam halted.

"Hyar's fun. Take these matches an' stand right hyer. Ef I lose yer I'll sing out, an' you kin strike light ernuf fur me ter find yer by. Ef ther brass band strikes up, lie down an' keep cool. It ain't your chip; I'll do ther work fur ther firm, an' when it's safe I'll roust yer out."

Roget stared around him.

There was nothing at all visible, so that he could gain no understanding in that way; and as the Pistol Sharp slipped away as soon as he had spoken, he could ask no question.

"Has he led me here to drop me in the dark? If I thought he meant foul play, by heavens, I would try a shot before he gets out of hearing."

And that thought suggested another—that Snapshot Sam might try that very game. To provide against the possibility, he flung himself down at full length and listened with bated breath.

For a few moments all was quiet. Then he was startled at hearing a strange voice.

"Is that yerself, captain, darlint? Av it wor, sing out, an' give ther countersign. An' av it worn't, sthand where yez are till I put a bullet through yez. Sure, it's a bowld mon yez would be, shportin' round Mickey O'Brien."

No reply broke the silence; and the sentinel, for such he evidently was, after a moment's pause, continued:

"Sp'ake at worst av yez don't want me to foire. An' suran' little good wa'd I be afther doin', ploogin' away in the darruk; but orders is orders, an' Mickey O'Brien is ther b'ye that follies 'em. Ah!"

There was a half-suppressed grunt and the noise of a fall. Snapshot Sam had distracted the attention of the sentinel by tossing a pebble where he certainly was not, and then explaining just where he was in a very forcible way. The sentinel went down like a lump of lead, with a sinewy hand claspin' his throat.

What it meant Roget could not exactly fathom, unless they had reached the Big Hope before they were aware of it. He crept nearer, uttering a warning whisper.

"Don't mistake. It is I. What have you got there?"

"Good fer you, pard. You stick closter than a brother, an' ain't afeard ter chip when it's your say-so. I ain't jest so sure what she are, but it 'pears ter me we've struck suthin' good. Jest take hold, will yer, and we'll cart him off where we kin have a leetle private conversashun."

"Aren't you afraid of there having been some one near enough to overhear?" asked Ernest cautiously.

"Oh, ther other feller's dead, an' they're nigh on to a quarter ov a mile out from ther camp, or whar ther camp must be. I dunno ez ther wild Irishman kin tell me anything 'bout ther route that I dunno; but he kin give me a hint at what's at ther other end. I'll stand fur it thet we won't meet nothin' 'twixt hyar and thar. Bear a hand, an' we'll jest tote him 'round whar we kin afford ter strike a leetle light, an' see what he looks like."

The "wild Irishman" kept silent through necessity, and was carted away by the two without any ceremony.

"Thar," said Sam, at length, "a glim might be seen a good ways up ther alley whar he war standin', but I'll risk it hyar. Jest put ther muzzle ov yer dropper agin' his bowels, an' ef he opens his potater trap, 'cept ez we yank ther strings, pull ther trigger."

Roget did not hesitate, and Mickey remained perfectly silent, though he had never lost con-

"Now, we'll squint him over."

It was no easy job to do all at once, by the light of the little taper which the Pistol Sharp produced; but they took in his face by sections, and got a pretty fair idea of the general appearance of their captive.

"A new man, er I'm a howlin' liar, frum up ther krick. He don't know much; but you bet, what he does won't be long on ther way comin' out."

As he spoke the light slowly wandered over his own face, and the Irishman gave a little start of surprise.

"Sure, it's Captain Black, hissill. Och, captain dear, what was yez be afther doin' wid a poor b'ye loike mesill? Touch me loightly, fur Oi'm yer friend till death."

"Then why ther thunder don't yer speak out? I'm waitin' ter hear what's goin' on hyar, an' who's in at ther hole?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A PEEP INTO THE HOLE IN THE WALL.

"SURE, an' ther's no wan thar but ther b'yes, ez you lift them."

"Pull ther trigger!" interrupted Snapshot Sam, sternly.

Whether the command was given in good earnest or not it had its effect. The Irishman took a fresh start.

"Ef it's that phat yez wants ter know why didn't yez say so? It's jist ez yer lift it. Oi mane, av coorse, ther b'yes an' ther young leddy that yer bring in ter-day."

"That I bring in?"

"Ther sanel?"

"And how many ov ther boys are thar?"

"Foive, wid mesill an' anither."

Mickey answered the questions straight along, and as Sam knew somewhat and suspected more of what he was talking the answers seemed to be satisfactory. He turned to Roget:

"We ain't got much use fur this galoot, an' ther best thing ter do with him 'll be ter tie him up an' crawl inter ther hole. I s'pose he'd sell 'em all out fast ernuf, but ez I know ther place better ner he does I can't see ez we want him. You're game fur ther racket?"

"Where you can go I can follow."

"Then we'll leave him. Guess you'll be safer along than watchin' round hyar in tner dark."

The protest that Mickey O'Brien undertook to raise was cut suddenly short. Before he fairly knew what their intentions were he was trussed up to a tree, a gag in his mouth and his face to the bark, with his arms around the trunk. In such plight the two left him, and retracing their steps a little continued cautiously their journey in the dark.

"I don't count on you doin' much heavy work, but I do reckon you'll see thar ain't no monkey biz frum behind."

"But what does it all mean?"

"Jest what I'm goin' ter find out. There's only three of them at headquarters, but there's no tellin' how soon some more may drop in. We'll clean things up in a hurry, find out what ther stack ov dry goods is they hev on hand, an' then, mebbe we'll slip back ter Angels, an' mebbe we won't. Ther chickens ain't hatched, an' it's no use countin' so fur ahead."

Roget would have answered again, but an impatient gesture quieted him. Following closely in the footsteps of his guide, he took the opportunity to look around him a little, even though it was too dark to hope to see much.

The sentinel had been placed right at the opening of a narrow little passageway that led in among the rocks, and into it Snapshot Sam plunged without much regard to what might be ahead of them. If he had not known the place pretty well he would never have been able to make his way along so thoroughly at his ease.

After a little, a glimmering of light showed itself ahead of them.

The Pistol Sharp held up his hand.

"I'm runnin' this lay-out. When I go dead broke, it'll be time ernuf fur you ter take up ther playin'. Keep a rod behind, an' when I stop, you stop. You'll see a heap ov fun ef ther boys are awake."

And late though the hour was, the boys were awake. In a little huddle they sat together just in front of the fire, one of them with his back squarely to it, the other two sitting one on either side of him, while all three held the cards that had kept them from their slumber.

The stakes did not seem to be very high, but they were contending for them with all the earnestness of men whose lives were hanging on the hazard.

"Chip, Jim," said one, in a husky whisper, as the two came within earshot of the players. "It's your ante, an' ther more money you put down the less you'll take up. Ef it warn't fur ther big stake ye'r ter sc'op in when this other game we're playin' in 's over, yer wouldn't be so flush with yer money. But don't yer furgit it, big stake or not, hyer's ther child ez scoops in all ther leetle ones he kin git his grabbers on. I'm a boss on wheels at it, an' ther keerds are all my way."

"Neither game ain't done yit, an' thar's a on-sartainty 'bout 'em till they're over."

"Jimuel, yer' bloody right."

Snapshot Sam stepped out into the open as he spoke, a pistol in each hand, and they could hear the sharp click of the hammers as they went back.

"I don't want to crowd you," he added; "but when I pull trigger two on yer draps, an' thar don't seem much chance left for ther t'other one. You hear me? Hands up!"

The surprise was so complete that it was no wonder three pair of dirty paws went up into the air. At that distance the merest tyro could have made at least two shots tell; and there was a terrible uncertainty as to who was to be the third man left, and whether there would be time enough for him to get in his work before he went also.

The way Snapshot Sam came at them showed he was a man of both sense and sand.

"Now, pard, you jest take charge of them weepins, an' then we'll sot down an' talk ther matter over. That's right. You're ole bizziness, every time. Makes a feller feel bad thet ther odds ain't bigger so ther' would be some fun a-buckin' agin' 'em. You got 'em?"

"In more ways than one," coolly responded Roget.

He had stepped forward without the least hesitation, pistol in hand, and possessed himself of the weapons with a readiness that was wonderful, and now stood with the three belts swung over his left arm, while he covered one of the villains in as steady style as that of his more experienced partner.

"Guess we had better tie 'em up. Won't hardly do ter give 'em a chance fer a rush while I'm a-nosin' round. Eh?"

"I don't think either of them is so anxious to die that he would be willing to plunge into certain death. But if you have any doubts do what you think best. There are only three of them anyhow."

"Well, we'll see what they've got to say fer themselves. Jimmy, where'll I find ther young lady?"

"See hyar," growled the man addressed. "Ef this are a snide game you've put up on us you'll wish yer hedn't done it afore yer gits through with us. We kin take a leetle fine work ez it comes; but yer can't play no dirt, an' then rub it in. Sabbe?"

"Nobody's tryin' ter rub it in. It's jest a good square game; an' ther' won't be much

foolin' 'bout it. You heard me whisper; I wouldn't advise you fer ter wait till I hev ter shout. Make up yer mind yer never seen me afore, an' make a clean breast. Whar's ther gal?"

"Blamed if I b'l'ave I ever *did* see yer afore; an' it's mighty onfort'nate I didn't make up my mind ter that sooner. You'd 'a' bin smellin' powder, 'stead ov me scrouchin' hyar like a hump on a log. Ef yer must know, ther dry-goods are packed in ther hole in ther wall. Ef yer don't know whar that are I'll go 'long an' show yer."

"Oh, no, I guess not, Jimmy. Settle down till I git back. My pard's a bad man frum Bodie, an' jest fool ernuf ter shoot when ther cat jumps. Ef it's all bin told me squar' it'll be all right, an' you kin go on yer way rejoicin'. Ef not you'll git sich a dose ov fisick you won't keer ef skule keeps er not. Watch 'em close, pard; they're a ugly crowd."

The Pistol Sharp had his reasons for being in haste, and not wanting to press his advantages too far. He trusted Roget from what little he had seen of him, and leaving him to face the three men he stepped over the fire, snatching up a brand as he went, and apparently walked into the solid rock.

At once he was in a narrow rift, the entrance to which was concealed by nature; and swinging his torch to keep it aglow he hurried along, his eyes and ears open to catch the slightest sight or sound.

It was just as well they did so.

Without warning a dark form raised itself from the floor of the passage and flung itself at him with a low snarl.

It did not find him unprepared. Quick as was the savage movement he was quicker.

Down upon one knee he dropped, thrusting straight forward with the torch, and at the same time his right hand came up, a stunning report echoed through the cave, and a body dropped heavily.

"Sorry fur ther hound. He must 'a' bin a-sleepin' er I wouldn't 'a' got so fur in. Ther rest ov ther way are plain sailin'."

He kicked aside the still quivering body of an enormous hound and went on for a few steps more. Then he stooped low, and almost creeping through an aperture that he found in the side of the narrow passage.

All the time he moved confidently forward, and now, when he found himself in a snail chamber, perhaps a dozen or so feet square, he appeared perfectly at home.

Nor was he at all embarrassed or excited when he came face to face with a young lady, who rose quietly from the rude couch on which she had been lying.

"Well, sir, you have come at last, have you? Complete your work, or beware. Unless you lay me a corpse at your feet I swear never to cease from my work until the murder of my father has been amply avenged."

At the sound of the voice Snapshot Sam started, and swinging his torch so that it burst into a brighter flame he held it up until the glare fell full upon her face.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed, after a short but steady stare.

Then to himself he muttered:

"Fur what hev our sins come a-visitin'? I'll be—an' so forth, with ther variations ef it ain't ther 'riginal Simon-pure Elsie Kane. What's she doin' here? Are it a clew, er ain't it?"

As he glared at her the girl gave a cry—whether of surprise or alarm it would have been hard to say.

Then she fell back a pace or two until she almost crouched against the wall, the courage she had at first shown being for the moment gone.

"Who are you?" she gasped. "What do you want? Why have you come—"

"Oh, stop it. Thar's no time fur mill-clack. We must dust. The boy's waitin' fur us, an' I wouldn't like fur ther boss ter meet him when he war alone. He's a mighty chief, an' chucks lead regardless. Come."

He held out his hand and the woman in a sullen sort of way came forward and followed him from the place. In another moment they stood in the glare of the fire.

"Della Venner!" exclaimed Roget. "What does this mean? Is this the Big Hope, or what strange game has been going on?"

"Ther boy are right," muttered Sam again to himself, though some of his words reached Ernest. "Della Venner, Elsie Kane. What's ther difference. I kin see it now."

Then, aloud:

"Don't ax too many questions when yer git back to the Flat; mebbe ther damsel'll tell yer what's what; but thar ain't no time fur foolishness now. You boys, jest don't worry an' yer won't be hurt. It's all right till daylight. Then, when ther boss comes—git. Angels' Flat'll be gunnin' arter yer ov yer tarry."

Without waiting for an answer he led the way, followed by Della, clinging to Roget's arm.

CHAPTER XXV.

SNAPSHOT SAM DISCOVERS THAT WOMEN CAN BE UNGRATEFUL.

THE men that were left in the Flat were enthusiastic enough, considering; but, unfor-

tunately, they lacked a leader, and the crowd hardly felt itself, after a moment of cooler reflection, to be large enough for the contract proposed by Miss Venner.

Of course every man knew that the Flat would stand by a woman under such circumstances; but when all of the representative men of the camp were up to their ears in business elsewhere, it was natural that there should be some hesitation.

"Hey ter wait till mornin'," was the whispered opinion of several, who did not care to voice it aloud; and the rest were just getting ready to concur, when a couple of stragglers came in. They had dropped off from the pursuit of the abductor of Miss Chase, when they found that they were totally thrown off the scent, and not much chance of striking it again until daylight. Johnny Chase had acted a little too promptly to have them at his heels; though, if he had waited for them to go with him, it is likely he would have been thrown out too.

At the head of the returning gang came Sid Dare, and it did not take him long to get the rights of the new phase of the complicated state of affairs, and he expressed his indignation in a way that vastly edified the bystanders.

Then he interviewed the lady herself.

"I undertook to see you through, miss, and I mean to do it if you'll just say the word. If you had trusted to Ed I'll bet big money he would have brought you through right in the end—unless they killed him before they began operations. You didn't see anything of his corpse lying around loose?"

"I saw nothing of him, and I believed that he had turned traitor along with the rest, but now that you speak, I half understand. Most likely the first shot, that I took for a signal, was aimed at him. Perhaps he is dead. If you are his friend you will start at once, to find what has become of him."

"You are right. I will start at once with as many good men behind me as I can get; but I shall leave you here. In the wild work that may follow you would be all out of place. To-morrow will be time enough for you to appear on the carpet, if all goes right. The Flat has its hands full to-night with all these expeditions, and I must know that you are somewhere in safety. Not a step will a man take unless you remain; if you do I go at once to look after your interests, and, if need be, to avenge a true friend as ever drew breath. How shall it be?"

"Go, by all means. So that I know that the villains are not to go unwhipped of justice I care not to go over that road again to-night."

And she gave a shudder and a shrug. No wonder that a woman, even of her courage, would prefer the safety of Angels' Flat to going where bullets might fly.

Dare was prompt to act, though he was puzzled. He went out into the crowd, and at almost a word several men had volunteered to follow him.

He quietly winked at them, and then there were a number more whom he accepted without winking. Acting almost as promptly as he had done before, he organized his little army and once more started for the Big Hope.

He knew the way well enough, but this time he acted with decidedly more caution. There had been so many unexpected twists and wrinkles in the matter of the Big Hope that it was no wonder. The road was lonesome, and though it was not such a crowd of pilgrims as Captain Black could profitably tackle there was no telling what he might do, especially under a slight misapprehension of their mission.

It was not a panicky crowd, but when they had reached the point that Bobby Blue-nose and his charge had passed when they diverged from the true path to the mine there was a sudden halt and almost a retreat, as a man stepped fearlessly out into the road.

"Hello, you thar! Don't yer take another step till we see what's in ther air. Who are yer, an' whar yer goin' this time ov night? I'm a listenin'; talk sharp afore I begin in airnest."

"And who are you?" asked Sid Dare, just as sharply; uncertain, yet half-thinking that he recognized the voice.

"Oh, I'm Snapshot Sam, frum 'way down, an' I mean biz. If it's Black's gang, say ther word an' I'll let drive."

"Ah!"

There was a good bit of satisfaction in Dare's tone. Snapshot Sam might be a valuable reinforcement; and anyway it was not likely that he would care to bother with the men from the Flat.

"You're a man after our hearts, and the kind we're yearning for. If you're as square a sport as you've been trying to let on, you'll 'bout face and go along with us to the Big Hope. There has been some black work, there, and we're going to know the rights of it before the night is over!"

"Count yer uncle Ezra in on ther ground floor. What's bin goin' on?"

"The very thing we want to know. Miss Venner, the daughter of the former proprietor, came on last night to look after her interests, and went out there this morning to see how the land lay. There was some little sculdugery tried on the way, but the boys rose to set her straight,

and took her out to the mine. The elder looked as though butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, and we just left her there with Ed Cahill and a couple more to look after her interests. We think they've killed Ed; and they'd have taken her in if she hadn't climbed out as lively as she knew how."

"So we left her back at the Flat, and we're going on to see what's become of Ed, and whether we can't set things straight. That's the story in short; won't you join in?"

"Thar seems ter be su'thin' kinder mixed 'bout that yarn," rejoined Sam, thoughtfully. "Ez fur ez heard from, ther aforesaid young woman didn't make ther rifle at all. Leastwise, ther damsel ez started didn't git furdur than so fur. I pulled her outen ther hands ov Cappen Black's gang less ner an hour ago, an' she's sottin' back yonder, waitin' ter see what sorter a gang this be afore she shows up. Ef this are her who war she? You kin figger on a answer till I git back. I did allow ter do a leetle fancy shootin' when I stepped onter ther carpet; but bein' ez yer all seems ter be 'bout es squar' ez ther run I'll let up. Hold hard thar a minnit. I'll see yer all later."

Snapshot Sam vanished as he spoke, leaving Dare, who was the acknowledged leader, in a dubious frame of mind. It might be that the Pistol Sharp was telling this yarn to throw them off their guard while he arranged matters to suit himself; but it seemed more likely that there was a bed-rock of truth somewhere, that differed a little from anything they had seen or heard of, and they waited in some anxiety to see if he would return and open up. All the same, no one understood what he meant, and it was the surprise of the season, spite of all the other surprises, when, from the covert he once more emerged, this time accompanied by Ernest Roget, and an individual that was undoubtedly feminine.

"Allow me, gentlemen. Ef yer ain't met her afore, this are Miss Della Venner; an' ez I remarked in Poison Pete's las' night, I'm backin' her game. Are ther anybody hyar ez wants ter sit down on me?"

"Oh, see here, now, there must be some mistake somewhere. We just left the simon-pure article back at the Flat."

"Bet yer sweet life yer didn't, ez Sammy Sanders will say when he sees the two together. Tell 'em yer story, miss, an' see what they make ov it."

But Della Venner's usually ready tongue somehow failed her now. Small blame to it after the experiences she had had. She was silent for a moment, and when she did speak it was in faltering tones that were hardly recognizable.

"Gentlemen, what he says is very true, as far as it goes, especially in regard to Mr. Sanders. I do not understand everything as yet, but I know that I am Della Venner, and I can prove it. When I have done that, back in the Flat, I will tell you all the rest. One thing is certain, I am safe and sound; so there is no need for you to go any further."

"But—but—look here. What has become of Ed? And who the thunder was it that we left at the camp? I don't want to doubt the word of a lady—"

"You better wouldn't. There'd be meat fur breakfast, sure."

Snapshot Sam's hasty interruption put the climax on Dare's bewilderment.

"Confound me if I know what to believe. If this is straight the other was crooked all through, and Ed is right side up. Might have known that, too. I'll take it all in far enough to go back to Angels for a fresh start, and if I find this all straight as a string, I'll never believe anything again that I don't see."

"A heap good rule fur bettin', ez well ez other-wise. You kin do ez you please, but there's one thing you kin lay yer bottom dollar on. Ef yer go foolin' 'round ther Big Hope this time ov night Elder McKinzie'll lay yer cold. What yer all say, fellers?"

A chorus of voters decided for the Flat. There were several there who had seen Della Venner arrive, and were confident that this was the same person; and it would have been very singular if they had not scented a mystery, and felt anxious to get to the bottom of it. Without much more delay the back trail was taken; and in due time, to the astonishment of the few men lingering around Sammy Sanders's place, the delegation reached its starting place once more.

"Miss Venner here?" asked Dare, sharply, as he came to the front, leaving the lady in the background.

"I s'pose so. Went to her room an hour ago, an' ain't heered nothin' to ther contrary sence. What, in all nashun, brung yer back?"

"Never mind that; just bring her here. We have the most astounding bit of news for her, and the sooner she hears it the better."

Sanders shuffled away, and came back shortly, the picture of astonishment.

"Sw'ar ter goodness she ain't thar, an' it don't look ez though she'd bin thar. Suthin' curious 'bout it."

"You bet ther' is," broke in Snapshot Sam. "Mebbe she looks like those. Ef not, why not? Ain't this ther lady herself?"

Sammy Sanders held up his hands in wondering astonishment as he caught sight of the feminine, who now came boldly forward, every trace of timidity having disappeared the moment she was once more within the limits of the Flat.

"I'll sw'ar to her, an' that's a fact. She looks twicet ez nat'ral ez she did a bit ago; but what's ther game now?"

"This!" shouted Miss Venner, cocking the revolver she had snatched from the belt of the nearest man, and thrusting it suddenly against Snapshot Sam's heart.

"This man betrayed me and means to befool you. Make him your prisoner while I hold him at bay. I swear to him that the first move he makes he dies. Seize him! He is Captain Black, of the road-agents! I know that much beyond a doubt, and I believe that I can lead you to his most hidden retreats."

And like one man they all fell upon Snapshot Sam. Before he fairly realized how the tide was setting against him he was a prisoner.

CHAPTER XXVI.

KATRINA IN GRIEF.

"SUIT yerself, miss," was about all the prisoner had to remark. He was as cool as the North Sea wheeling-ground, and evidently had full confidence that Miss Venner's threat was no idle one. He made no effort to escape, nor even to draw a weapon. The drop was on him so completely that it would have been folly to do either and expect to live.

She was ably seconded by Sid Dare, whose hands appeared full of pistols with a readiness that was truly remarkable.

"I've thought all along that there was something that needed explaining, and since the lady has opened up the ball herself I believe I'll take a hand. There is a little fortune of a thousand or so in Captain Black, and if there is such an amount on the books here you won't wonder if I look around to see how it is. What is the true story, Miss Venner?"

Although no one knew what the result was going to be the odds were already against Sam, and of course the rest of the drift would be the same way.

"I don't know what story you may have heard; but the truth proves itself. That rascal, Blue-nose, betrayed me. Three of this villain's tools attempted my capture and I stood them off. Then he came seemingly to my assistance and completed the work when I was off my guard. In my place he sent another woman, his confederate, who would have taken possession at the mine. She it was that came here when the other villains drove her out. Then, no doubt fearing that his hand would be discovered in this, and seeing that present success in his game was hopeless, he pretended to rescue me, having spirited his partner away. That is short and plain. Now, what are you going to do about it?"

"If it's proved that he is Captain Black I reckon we are going to hang him, miss," said one of the bystanders, stepping forward. "He's killed enough men to hang a dozen, and if your father's blood is not on his hands the Flat is pretty badly fooled. Anyhow, we'll coop him up for the night, and to-morrow there will be a chance for all of you to talk."

A murmur of assent followed, and Snapshot Sam, still unresisting, was led away.

"He takes it heaps too easy," was the muttered comment of more than one; but for all that there was no change of programme suggested, since no one could imagine how he could possibly get away.

There was in Angels' Flat, as there should be in every well-regulated camp, a building that was used as a calaboose.

Quite a solid little cabin it was, built of logs, and without a sign of window. Entrance was obtained through a heavy door of slabs, and light came through the doorway, where a guard was sometimes placed, when the huge padlock was removed, and through the aperture in the roof, which allowed the smoke to escape, at such times as a fire within might be thought needful. As it was at least a dozen feet up to the comb of the roof, where this opening was, and some of one was always within hearing distance, no one thought of it as a practicable avenue of escape.

Into this little den, which was now dark as Erebus, Snapshot Sam was thrust, and with bound hands and utterly weaponless it was pretty certain that he could do little to help himself out of the hobble when the stout door was once shut on him, and a guard established on the outside.

The town was by this time pretty well exhausted. A good many familiar faces were missing, and the supposition was that they had dropped off from the different expeditions. The remainder of the inhabitants had no great desire to stand guard in the most dismal hours, just before morning, though the risk was little, and the probable glory nothing at all. It was some time before a detail could be arranged for, and it might not have been secured then had not Della Venner, with all the charming obstinacy she was capable of, put herself forward as a volunteer. Then Sid Dare arranged it without

much trouble. What a woman like Miss Venner said was necessary had to be done.

After that, as there was nothing to do until morning, the greater part of the crowd started to hunt their couches to be in some sort of trim for the following day, though a good many of them lingered by the way.

There was one man that had slid off in the quietest sort of way; and that was Ernest Roget.

He had kept himself in the back-ground, for some reason that he could not define to himself, and in the excitement over Snapshot Sam was entirely overlooked. He saw then that it might not be so healthy to have attention called in his direction, and very meekly did he glide away. As his name had not been mentioned in the story told by Miss Venner no one inquired after him, and he had no desire to remind anybody of the oversight.

The little coop called, by courtesy, his room, was there all right; and as there was actually a lock on it he felt relieved as he turned the key, for since hearing the extraordinary statements of Kate Chase he had been feeling a good deal of uneasiness at such odd times as his mind was not otherwise employed.

"All right here. Good enough. I'll put the grip under my head and sleep the sleep of the just. I can't go this way much longer."

Then his soliloquy broke off. It was not all right. The "grip" was no longer there.

What was to be done? If Kate Chase—or Dorris Lake, whichever the reader henceforth chooses to call her—was right, something awful had happened. What was he to do?

Worn out as he was the shock of the discovery at first unmanned him so that he staggered back against the bed, almost unconscious.

After a little he felt another shock. It seemed to him that he woke out of a dream to hear somewhere in the distance the echo of a despairing cry.

For the moment he almost forgot himself and his troubles as he listened eagerly. It might not be any of his business, yet instinct told him that it was.

"Some one is in danger—and it may be that it is the some one that was in my room. It is big money to play for, and I'll follow it up alone."

With a coolness that one would scarcely have expected he drew his revolver, examined it critically to see that the loads were all right, and then moved out into the narrow hallway, and along at a venture, in the direction whence he thought the cry had proceeded.

He was not very thoroughly posted on the house, but had a sort of general idea how it lay; and Sanders himself could scarcely have gone in the dark straighter to the ladder that led to the attic beyond.

There he hesitated a moment; but when once more he heard something like a suppressed groan he darted up, careless of the fact that if he was discovered he might be in more peril than would be pleasant.

He found himself in a low room, faintly lighted by a dimly burning lamp. Scattered around were boxes, barrels and such lumber, while at the further end was a low couch, from which came the sound of heavy breathing. The occupant might be in pain, and might have the nightmare.

Whatever was the matter Roget did not waste time, but on tip-toe moved up to the bed.

The lamp stood near by, on the top of an old box. Turning up the wick, so that he could see more clearly, he bent over, and then started back in surprise.

A pair of keen, ferret eyes were staring up at him, in a way that reminded him painfully of a wild beast in a trap. Misled somewhat by their glare it took him a moment to understand that the form half-clothed in feminine apparel, with hands tied together, mouth gagged, and the haft of a knife rising up from the blood-covered breast, belonged to Katrina.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "There has been murder done here!"

A cry for help lingered on his lips, and then was hushed by something he saw in the eyes. Instead of alarming the house, he bent over and viewed the situation with unexpected calmness.

The first thing he noted was that the wound was not necessarily mortal—that, indeed, it was possibly of quite a trivial nature.

Without stopping to consider the danger of such a course, he drew the knife out of the wound, with a steady hand, and with the blade severed both the cords at her wrists, and the gag at her mouth.

"Ah, old lady, you played me a dirty trick to-night; I don't know that I'm more than half sorry to see it coming back on you. What does all this mean, anyhow? Who has been trying to kill you, and what was it for?"

He saw that Katrina, in spite of the unlooked-for self-control, was too anxious to speak, or had some reason to be silent.

"Don't worry about the damage; it's only a flea-bite. But, if you want to get even, now's your time to talk. Shall I rouse the house?"

"Nein, nein. Dhere vos nodings der masser. Yust go 'way. Katrina vill dake keer mit herself."

"All right; I feel a delicacy about intruding, and I shan't insist. If I hadn't heard you, you would have had a confounded uncomfortable time from now until morning. If you say so, I'm off, and you can run your own concern; but I would like to know what is the meaning of all this."

"It vos der girl," gasped Katrina. "She vos—"

There was a sudden breaking off, and Roget saw that she was staring over his shoulder in a bewildered sort of way.

Quick as a flash, he whirled upon his heel, with revolver up and ready.

In front of him stood Kate Chase, her arms folded across her breast, and a singular smile on her face.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BOBBY IS SURPRISED.

"So you are here, are you? Do you think there is any more damage that can be done?"

"You asked me that question once before. In the name of Heaven, what do you mean—what is the meaning of all this masquerade? Or is it one, at all? Have I been so mistaken in you that now I almost fail to recognize you when I see you as you are?"

"If I have been masquerading, what have you been doing? It appears to me that, for a quiet, peaceable darling of fashion, you have managed to do pretty well among the fire-eaters of the Flat. And just now I am trying to make up my mind whether this is murder that you are after. I can't see the object; but who can tell what a man will do when he goes clear crazy? You could have no interest in doing it, but it looks very much to me as though you were trying to kill the cook."

"Heavens! Have you heart for such folly? My presence here is easily explained. What excuse can you give for yours?"

He knew he must mention his loss, and yet hesitated to begin the story.

"Excuse enough. You told me you had brought not only a message, but something more tangible. I am here to receive the latter. After that I think our ways will begin to diverge."

"And I am here because I found that while looking for you, some one had been searching, to good purpose, for me. The box is gone."

"Let it go, then," she said, in a low but bitter tone. "I might have known it; I did know it. I am not disappointed."

"But I am. I know nothing and care less for any fortune. I came to find Dorris Lake that was; and you are not she. She would never be either the wife of a man like John Chase, or the second terror of the town."

"I might answer that you were taking too much for granted when you accused me of being either; but to what good? I warned you not to step between me and destiny. You have tried to do it, and what the end will be no one can tell. Or—are you worse even than I imagine? What are you doing here?"

"I have told you, or tried to. When I found that some one had raided my room I was overwhelmed for a little. Then I heard a groan and followed the sound. You see what I found. I had looked rather for Captain Black; but the work may after all have been that of some one nearer. You have heard me with wonderful coolness."

For the moment he had his suspicions, and they seemed not altogether without foundation.

"What do you mean by that?"

"The hint ought not to be hard to understand. Whoever stole that packet passed through here, I will stake my life, and that woman knows who it was. Ask her. The thieves may only have fallen out."

He looked toward the bed, and as though fully understanding the meaning of the glance, the woman hastily pulled the covering over her head, and refused to be interviewed.

"Is she too badly scared to talk, or is she bent on shielding the thief that robbed you rather than me, or have you been here before me, and is this real work or a fence? The few words she let fall struck as hard against you as against any one else. And yet—I know that she is an ally of Captain Black, and that you have good cause to hate him."

"Hold! You charge her with being a friend to Captain Black?"

"Something very like it, since she betrayed me into his hands this very evening. It turned out well enough, but the intention was all the same. People who know what you underwent there might say you came here for vengeance."

And people who knew Kate Chase as she appeared at the Saint's Rest would have been surprised to see how calmly she could listen to Ernest Roget, angry as her words showed her to be.

"Thank you for the very good taste you show in trying to exchange places. I need hardly deny any of the insinuations."

"And yet a man of your caliber might even believe such trash. Fortunately the Flat knows me too well to take any stock in it—when I strike it is openly and above-board. But I can't say what they might think of you under the cir-

cumstances. Worse than I, probably, since I understand you better than you think."

"This meeting, as well as all the others, seems to have been unfortunate for both of us. If I could have helped you with my life—with my soul—I would have done it. I am not sure you have not wrecked both without profit to yourself. If through me you have suffered loss, it was through the folly of others who might have warned me. I swear I will do my best to repair it."

"Stop. Only let me and mine alone. Whatever is to be done for me I will do it. Only go away—only leave me to myself. Your own safety as much as mine demands this."

He could believe that much if the half that he had heard about John Chase was true. He listened to her coldly, and yet it was not hard to see that a struggle was going on in his mind.

After a moment's delay he spoke:

"Dorris Lake, I know I have been mistaken in you as man seldom is in woman—I could hang myself for the mad blindness that made you little less than an angel in my eyes. And yet your lips have never lied to me, and if you utterly reject my services as a friend, I accept what they have said to me as final."

He held out his hand with a gesture that might mean he wished to part from her as a friend; but she waved it aside, and simply muttered:

"Go."

"I will, and yet you might have spared me a little. You did tell me frankly that you were not free to take me as a friend—if you had only told me why!"

"Have it as you will, I hold myself blameless. Only go. Let me and my affairs alone forever."

She answered him with a steady coldness that left him nothing more to hope or wait for, and without another glance at the bed, or even another thought of the wounded woman, he silently and slowly made his way back to his room.

"I don't know whether I ought to be glad or sorry," he murmured to himself, in a bewildered way. "Such a tigress! Yet it seems to me that I cannot give her up. There is, there must be some explanation to this mystery. Surely, no woman could live this life without a strong motive. Is it worth my while to find it out? Fool that I am! I am trying blindly to find an excuse; yet if I did what good would it do? Of one thing I am sure. She is lost to me forever."

Meantime, Dorris Lake—or Mrs. Kate Chase, as the Flat called her when it wanted to put on airs—was showing no such signs of agitation. In the one glance she gave after Roget there may have been something of regret; but after that it was evident that she had put him entirely out of her mind. She went up to the bedside once more, and with a firm hand drew away the covering from the cowering figure, while she spoke, sharply:

"I almost begin to think that you are beneath contempt. I hate a coward, anyhow, and you are worse. Is there any truth in his charge that you have been dealing with Captain Black, and betrayed him into his hands? If I thought so—I swear I would be tempted to leave you to your fate. Without me, now, you will be dead in a day."

Katrina looked suspiciously around, answering in a low tone:

"Katrina no fool; she looks a leedle oudt. No harm has dere come to der young herr, an' she made herself solid mit der captain. Fer vos you keer. You be mighty glad ter git rid of him."

"Very solid, indeed; and if he had not escaped—saving me, too, at the risk of his life—you would have been dead before I could reach you. I will not give you up, though. I will help you just once more. Come!"

What answer might have been given was cut short by the sound of a pistol-shot, followed by a yell.

"What is that?" she exclaimed, and in silence they waited as though the night without might give them an answer.

They heard faintly the sounds made by men moving to and fro as though at fault; and then, so close to them that it made even the iron nerves of Dorris Lake give a start, there was a faint rapping.

"Katrina, my angel, just this once more. This time they'll kill him sure ef yer don't help yer own Bobby."

The smothered voice came from the other side of the wall, just behind the bed.

There was a look of disgust on the face of Kate Chase, but she did not wait to have the appeal repeated.

Leaning forward she touched a spring, a small door swung open, and through the aperture thus opened Bobby Blue-nose scrambled into the room.

"This time it's all up with me, my angel. Yer Bobby 'll hev ter git up an' prance. Ther Flat hev sot down on me, an' ef I hadn't gi'n 'em ther slip, I'd bin a-swingin'. I ain't furgittin' ov yer but I've got ter travel. Gi'n me yer blessin' an' some cold vittals, an' lemme go. Black hez hed me ag'in, an' ther Flat hez riz right at me. Yer own Bobby, don't yer know?"

It was pretty evident that Mister Blue-nose

was, in the vernacular, full up to the chin; but at the same time he had wit enough to flee from the wrath that was coming. What he did not count on was the presence of any one there save Katrina. He collapsed suddenly as he felt the cold muzzle of a pistol thrust solidly against the butt of his ear.

"You are dealing with me, now, and not with Katrina. Hands up, Robert; or head down. I mean business. We don't need you as a disturbing element just now, and will have to put you where you will do no harm."

The promptness with which Blue-nose took in the situation and held up his arms was laughable; and the expedition with which he was bound and gagged was something remarkable.

"There," said the little woman, as they rolled him up in the tattered bedclothes, "you'll stay there for the present; and as for your angel, she'll come along with me. It is time to be at work, and some one will find you before you starve."

CHAPTER XXVIII. SHADOWS OF THE NIGHT.

PLUMB CENTER PETE, as the evening advanced, kept himself more and more in the background, and in the latter performances, when Della Vener was escorted back in triumph and Snapshot Sam so suddenly placed in limbo, he did not appear at all.

For a few hours he was really uneasy over the disappearance of his friend, and it was with a great deal of relief that he saw him turn up once more, and quietly betake himself to his room.

It was no part of his plans to attract any attention to either Ernest or himself. Had they two been seen marching off together it might have aroused suspicion, and accordingly he waited around town for some time, gathering information, before following. Even then it was by the merest chance that he caught sight of two men, at some little distance from the station, so deeply engaged in a conversation that they were not quite as wide awake to their surroundings as they should have been.

"Thunder an' blazes!" ejaculated Blockey, taking a second look at them. "Pears ter me I oughter know them manly forms. Ef that ain't Johnny Chase hisself then I don't know beans when I see 'em. An' ther t'other feller—do me eyes deceive me? Ef it ain't ther genoine king-pin ov ther road-agents I ain't a jedgo ov sich matters. Thar's su'thin' up, an' Plumb Center Pete'll git at ther nub ov it, you jest bet."

While communing with himself Peter took a rapid survey of the situation, and hastily blocked out his course. By going back cautiously a little, and making a short detour, he saw his way to approaching within hearing distance.

No sooner was the plan conceived than he began to put it into execution; and as he moved with expedition, and had good luck in his approaches, it was not many moments until he was crouching behind a huge boulder, listening to the low murmur of voices.

"I tell you it is all up with me," John Chase was saying. "You can't fool her very bad on anything, and she has dropped to the rights of this, very solid. If I hadn't wasted quite so much time in that fool's play with the gang, and could have headed her off before she got to town there might have been some chance to square things. But she beat me in—how, the fiend only can tell—and now she has just dropped clean out of sight. We have been hunting her all over the camp, but there's not a sign of her to be found."

"She is there, nevertheless. Wild Will saw her go in, on horseback, and I will swear she never came out. You must find her, and if she won't speak to you turn her over to me. I don't care myself to venture into the camp."

"No, I suppose not," threw in Chase, dryly.

"They have an unpleasantly long memory down there; and they want you bad."

"Bah! It is not that I am afraid of the cuss; I was among them to-night, and I wouldn't mind having a little fun with the boys, just to show them how the town ought to be run. But there are some outsiders that I don't care to have locating me until the affair we have in hand is over. I leave the inside work to you; and if you don't run it up to nature you may know what to expect, that's all."

"I thought I had been running the camp in pretty good shape," began Chase, apparently stung as much by the manner of the other as by his words. "If things haven't been to your liking, you know where to take hold. I'm satisfied to get up and dust. Fact is, though I've got sand enough for all ordinary purposes, I'm not at all anxious to interview several of the tall animals. The more I consider Pete Blockey the more I don't like him; and if that Snapshot Sam wasn't safely juggled and booked for the rope I believe I would run away."

"Bad man, is he? Well, you can arrange for him when the time comes, but at present I want your assistance with the madam. If you think she would trust you again take some of the gang and run her out of the settlement. She will find the difference between fol-de-rol and sure business."

"I thought she got a pretty fair taste of that the little while she was in your hands. By heavens, if I had been there I'd have been tempted to shoot all I knew! I don't say I haven't a big interest in all this; but I do say, I won't have her harmed. A few days' time more or less makes no great difference; that all comes in the rough and tumble of life. But she's a woman in a million, badly as she has treated me; and the man that does or tries to do her any real harm settles with me."

The little man was evidently very much in earnest; and if he had been talking that way to a citizen of the Flat his words would have been received with most respectful attention.

Captain Black gave a short, dry laugh. "That's right, Johnny. I know you of old. You always did lift your hat when a woman went by; and no doubt this one, under the circumstances, is a bigger angel than an ordinary dozen. But we're not afraid that you'll cut up rusty when the time comes to work, or forget your oath to the men that run you. If you do—we will just kill you the same as we would any other man, and get some one that may not be able to shoot quite so straight to run things as I say. You sabbe?"

"I understand," answered Chase, sullenly. "Because she's got the best of me you think I'm no good for you any more and you're willing to get rid of me. I know well enough that if I dropped you here I'd have a dozen sleuths on my trail day and night, that would never show a finger until they had a fine chance to shoot at my back; but for all that if I was sure you would do her any real harm beyond the loss of money you'd never move from that spot alive. You see I've got you covered!"

"Of course I see it. What of it? I have been shot at until it's all an old story. There's only one way I'll ever die, and that is by the rope. I'll stave that off as long as possible, and when it comes there will be no whining or flinching. Try your hand if you want to, but when you get tired I'll begin. I'm just as certain as death that that young idiot gave her the key to-night; and I'm willing that you should get it from her, peaceably if you can, forcibly if you must. If you can't, stand aside and let a better man try. If I put that Sid Dare on the track, for instance? Do you think he'd want any guarantees of anything but his share of the spoils? Now, go look for her. When you find her, if you haven't enough brains to know what to do we'll take what little you have and get a man with more."

Plumb Center Pete listened to this conversation with deep interest, though from first to last it was a puzzle to him. Once, when he saw the skirt of Chase's coat go up he was sure that at last something was coming that he understood, but a moment later and he was all at sea again. His own pistol was turned on the road-agent captain several times, and he was strongly tempted to fire, but forbore. When the two moved away, in different directions, he silently followed Captain Black.

Somewhat to Blockey's surprise the captain strolled deliberately toward the very building toward which he had been going, and only halted when he was right in the rear of Sammy Sanders's place. There, he stood, gazing at the building with an air of expectancy.

"What in thunder does ther durned gerloot count on seein' thar? Blame me ef he ain't lookin' up at ther silent stars. Must be mad er moonstruck."

Captain Black, however, was neither.

Though Blockey was too far off to see it a rope was flung down from the roof to the ground; when he saw a dark form descending the side of the building he began to understand what the captain was there for.

"It's a woman, true ez a gun; an' it looks like ther fresh leetle daisy ez war so anxious ter anker at the Best Chance. Thar's suthin' more ner sing'lar about this hyar, wick needs 'vestigatin' an' Pete Blockey's jest ther man ter ketch on."

The two conversed together for a moment, in a low tone. Then Black moved toward the corner of the house, around which he disappeared. Then there came the report of a pistol, and Black reappeared, running swiftly. The woman caught his hand as he passed her, and before Plumb Center Pete had decided what course to pursue they had vanished.

Blockey was fairly nonplused. He was working in this thing by himself, and as he was not ready to leave the camp just then, and had no one to put upon the trail he was obliged to allow them to go.

Without much caution he left the temporary hiding-place into which he had dropped. When he had turned the corner, as the captain had done, he came upon a man stretched upon the ground; and bending over him, to obtain a fair view, he found that it was John Chase.

"Hello, what's goin' on hyar? Look kinder sick like, an' pears ter me ez I heerd ther sound ov shootin' a bit ago, wick it ain't alltergether missed. Fact are, he kinder slung it plumb-center—an' blast my tail-feather ef ther victim ain't Johnny Chase, ther bad man ov ther Flat, his very self. Wot hev they bin a-doin' to yer, Johnny? Hyar's yer old side-pard, Blockey; an'

he'll stand by yer, so speak her out lively now."

Pete could hear the teeth of the fallen sport grind together in a quietly savage way, that told more plainly than words how hard he was hit, and was conscious that a pair of very bright eyes watched him closely.

"It's time some one was coming; though I'm not certain that you didn't do the trick yourself. If you mean what you say, give me your hand and keep this thing quiet. I'm not as bad as I look, and some one will find that I'm a mighty hard cuss to kill."

"I mean it; in course I mean it. I'm the pard ov every square sharp I meet; an' ef that's your name count me in. Ef it ain't—well, I wouldn't hit a man when he's down. Better let me yell. You may be dyin' fur all I know."

"Keep still. I'm hurt, but I'll be right side up with care when I've had a chance to draw a long breath. Then I want to get around to the Best Chance and lay by a little without any of the boys knowing that I came so near to my last sickness. I don't know how he got the drop on me, but I wouldn't be afraid to risk my last ducat that I can tell who held for me."

After the interview that Pete had overheard that was not a very wild boast, but Blockey offered no suggestions. He was observing the wounded man attentively, and had an idea that he was hurt worse than he knew. The weak, wandering voice told a story, and he was in a study what he should do with him.

"Never you mind about that, though. There is plenty of time to get even, and if the whole truth was known I wouldn't so much blame him for taking a sitting shot at me when he had the chance. What I want now is to get away. Catch hold before I get a leg so far over the range that I can't move."

Chase made a weak effort to rise as he spoke, and Blockey, seeing that he was in good earnest, thought it best to at least make an attempt to follow out his wishes. The little man was hit through the shoulder, and fortunately the wound was more painful than immediately dangerous. After the first shock was over he began to gain something of his usual strength, and if he was moved promptly the chances were that it would be all the better.

It seemed a little singular that the noise of the shooting had not attracted attention, and though Blockey would soon have had some one about to see the exact rights of the case he thought he might as well go ahead and see what would be the result.

It was not as great an undertaking as he had feared. A little man and a big bullet coming together are apt to produce considerable shock, but with a man like the little sport that soon wears off. In five minutes Chase was safely under his own roof, and so far as could now be seen, none the worse for his journey.

"That's all I ask of you, except to keep quiet. Don't bring any doctors here—we can fix it all up among ourselves. When I get out and around I will make it all straight with you. John Chase never forgets the men that stand by him, and I think you are one of the kind that would do that thing till the last horn blows."

"Don't give yer Uncle Ezra any taffey—he's right around whar yer orter expect him. Ef I hed bin attendin' to my own biz, it would 'a' bin money in my pocket; but I'd sooner be honest than rich. So long."

And Pete Blockey went away fully satisfied that Johnny Chase was out of the complication for one while. Pity it is that we can't most always sometimes tell.

CHAPTER XXIX.

WHO WAS DORRIS LAKE?

BLOCKEY had lost too much time to make it worth his while to follow the road-agent captain, and he reverted to his original intention of looking for Ernest Roget. He went back to Sammy Sanders's place, and without meeting any one passed directly to the room.

To his surprise he found the young man not only awake but up and dressed and sitting at the little table, smoking.

"Good laws! what's in the wind now? I'd 'a' thunk, after all yer hed ter go through, you'd bin in bed an' snurin'."

"What's the use of going to bed in this house? I've tried it and it don't work. Sooner sit around till morning and see what is going on. Of all miserable exploring expeditions that I ever undertook or heard of this is the worst. I'm done with it now, and I'm sorry that there is no stage starting until day after to-morrow. I don't care about leaving here on foot."

"Skeered out, be yer? Thought yer had more sand. Still, ez nobody knows whar yer come hyar fur, an' yer hain't told no one ef yer hev made ther rifle or no, I guess yer hev ther chance ter back down 'ithout raisin' too much ov a laugh. Ef you've throwed good money away on a wild-goose chase, 'tain't nobody's lookout 'cept yer own. But melbe things ain't jest ez despr'it ez yer think. Ef I'm yer pard, how would it do ter let me hev a squint at yer keards? I sw'ar, yer ain't even tole me so fur whar sorter a game yer war playin'."

Pete Blockey leisurely dropped into a seat, and from his manner it was pretty clear that

he was in no great haste to retire. He was a man that could go for a week at a time without more than a few snatches of sleep, and he started in comparatively fresh at the flat.

"That's one for me," answered Roget, "and I deserve it. If you can keep your eyes open, I'll tell you the whole truth, and see what you think of it. I must have some one to talk to, and I'd sooner trust you than another. I wish I had done it sooner. You might have told me I was a confounded fool in the outset, and I would have believed you."

The discouragement in Roget's voice made Blockey feel positively happy, if looks went for anything. He rubbed his hands, and smiled in a provokingly unpleasant way.

"Hev'n't a doubt on it. In all my life, which ain't a skimp one, I never met a feller that wasn't jest sloppin' over with a desire ter feller sich advice ez didn't suit him. They're all ready ter put down two leetle pair, an' draw to an ace. Guess wild horses might 'a' pulled yer off ther trail, but Pete Blockey couldn't. Thar's a woman in it, ov course; an' what chance would I hev ag'in' ther shemale sect?"

"I guess you're right. I have no one to blame but myself. But, confound it, Blockey, it's rough to be in love with a woman—even half fancy that you had a show; and after you have followed her three thousand miles to tell her something you think will please her, to find that she is a little desperado on wheels, and the wife of another man."

"Mighty rough," assented Plumb Center Pate; "but sometimes it's better ter find her ther wife ov ther other feller than yourn. Young loyers are apt ter git derspondent, by ther way, an' mebbe things ain't ez bad ez they look. Ye'r talkin' 'bout Johnny Chase's widder, I suppose?"

"I suppose she will be, some day, if she don't go off first."

"Ther chances are ther other way at present. I jest picked him up with an ugly hole in his back; but that's nothin', hyar ner thar. Wot you want ter git at are, ef ther widder's willin' ter chuck some sweet looks your way, ef Johnny war outen ther road. Then you'd know what yer hed ter go on."

This cool way of treating the subject was not altogether pleasing. It was several minutes before Roget made any response.

Meantime Blockey had sidled his chair up in a way that really invited confidence, and looked wide enough awake to listen to any kind of a story. When Ernest did begin, it was after the manner of a man who has decided to make a clean breast of it.

"Confound it, Blockey, there's not so much to tell. It was a year or so ago that I happened to meet in St. Louis a young lady who bore the name of Dorris Lake. She boarded at the same house as I did, and so far as I could see, had not a friend in the world.

"Chance put it in my way to be able to do her a favor. I saved her life on two separate occasions.

"The first time I simply scared away a couple of ruffians who had pounced upon her unexpectedly. The next time I hauled her out of the river when she was almost at the last gasp.

"No one identified me either time, but after the second rescue she seemed to take me into her confidence.

"I am your debtor again," she said, "and it would be no more than fair to give you something of the cause that leads to all this; for I swear to you that this is no accident, and if you had not been near to help me, I would have been murdered. I don't suppose you ever heard of the Triplet fortune?"

"I confessed to her that I had not.

"Well, there is a fortune of from half a million to a million waiting the appearance of the rightful heirs, and as far as these ruffians and their employer know, I am the nearest and sole heir. Two or three others have died suddenly, and in a way that seemed purely accidental, as perhaps it was; and I have had a couple of pretty narrow escapes. If this thing keeps on, I wouldn't wonder if I went and killed a man. I know just where to strike. I have been off my guard, but you will not find me that way again. And when I am not, I believe I can take care of myself as well as any man."

"I didn't understand her then; and of her own accord she told me something of her past life.

"I can't blame them altogether," she added, "since it is their life or mine, and they know it. Still, it makes one mad to be used as a target for a man behind a bush, and to know at the same time that the villain has such a hold on me and mine that I dare not openly call him to account for fear that in the end it will be the worse for me. For the present I must stay here, and keep him here."

"The explanation was not very clear, and I gave no answer, only watching her more closely than ever. To tell the truth, I was half-afraid she was not altogether sane. After a while she went on:

"It is no new thing. Years ago he drove my father into exile, and broke my mother's heart. I can't for the life of me see how it is that the wicked man always can find his chance.

I know as well as that I am living that it was he who led away my brother into dissipation and every folly, until he, too, was forced to flee. For myself, somehow I have always found a friend in need, who saved me in the nick of time. Oh, if the day ever comes that I can strike back!"

"Let me strike for you!" I exclaimed.

"No; do not dare to think of such a thing! I am watching and waiting. He knows the secret that can save one who is very near and dear to me. If he dies, that will die with him. While he lives, there is always a chance that the truth will be known. After that, let him beware!"

"That was about all that she said then, but afterward, as our acquaintance progressed, I learned more; and could, I think, patch up the whole story piece by piece.

"Dorris Lake's father was supposed to have killed Chester Allen, and only one man—Hector Fargo, a cousin of the Lakes—knew the rights of the story. He witnessed the fatal quarrel, if there was any, and his account of it was unquestioned for years, even when he too disappeared just in advance of an ugly little story about him.

"From the night of the murder nothing was ever heard of Lake, so far as the world knew, and but for old Ephraim Triplet he would have remained forgotten. Fortunately, or unfortunately, he left his fortune so that Simon Lake, if he ever turned up, or his heirs when there was any proof of his death, would get it before any one else could. And he made old Harmon Lake, a crank as big as himself, executor.

"When that was understood, people remembered him, and began to think he would come back. With half a million dollars at his disposal, and the lapse of nearly twenty years in his favor, he ought to be able to either clear up the mystery or sink it out of sight.

"They did not take into account the fact that Hector Fargo might be living and thinking the same thing if he could once clear the way of a couple other heirs. Dorris Lake did, for she told me so; and she believed that it was his hidden hand that she was fighting.

"Some day I will have to set out to trail him down," she said to me. "When that day comes I am ready for the work."

"Shortly after that she disappeared, leaving a note for me that she had gone on her mission. From that day until this evening I never saw her again, and now I find her here the wife of a notorious desperado. Has she married him to gain his aid in fighting her battles?"

"Jest hold on a bit. You hev'n't told how you come to be hyar. Pears you sed suthin' 'bout hev'n' a mission."

In a few words Roget told the story with which the reader is already familiar.

"Queer sorter affairs these be. This hyar other woman—er wimmen, fur thar's two on 'em in ther box, an' yer kin take yer ch'ice—wonder ef they ain't got a leetle ter do with ther same outfit? Whar do yer allow they kim in at?"

"Not in the same boat. Miss Venner told me her story. It has nothing to do with the Triplet fortune."

"But a heap ter do with ole Sime Venner."

"Well, yes. She has made that much pretty plain in camp, so that I violate no confidence in telling it."

"An' who ther thunder's Venner? Betcher sweet life thar ain't two sich myst'ries at Angels' Flat. Ef I ain't lookin' clean through ther mill-stun, I've got my eye on ther center."

"And you think—" began Roget, fairly puzzled.

"That thar's a heap bad time outen doors. Thought ther town had simmered down, but it's no use. They will keep at it. They are goin' fur Snapshot Sam, ef my ears don't deceive me; an' ther Pistol Sharp's ther keynote to ther hull condemned diffikilty. We orter hev an eye on him. Will yer kim along?"

Pete had noted the noise outside that had been growing more audible for some minutes, and now was listening at the window. It was a very good guess that he made, and it hit the truth with wonderful accuracy.

The stragglers had come in, and after gulping down lots of flying rumors and bad whisky, had turned in with the rest of the town to finish the job off-hand. It had leaked out that Johnny Chase had been shot, and some one gave Snapshot Sam the credit of it; the affairs of the Big Hope had been discussed, and he was believed to be at the bottom of a deep-laid plot; the sayings and doings of Captain Black, of the read-agents, had received due consideration, and for them the Pistol Sharp had been held responsible, and all the cliques had united so far at least. If the world did not come to an end, or some other wonderful thing occur, Snapshot Sam was elected for a very uncomfortable time.

And with the gang that approached the lock-up came Ernest Roget and his ally, not to do but to see; though it was possible that circumstances might compel them to take a hand in the game of the night.

CHAPTER XXX.

JUDGE LYNCH GOES CALLING.

WHEN, at the instance of Della Venner, the

Pistol Sharp was so neatly corraled, the sentiment of the camp was unmistakably in favor of proceeding in his case with due moderation. If a court had been organized then and there, he would have been tried with all due respect to the primitive forms of lynch law. Of course the bias was all against the prisoner; but he would have had a chance to talk, and his evidence, if he had any, would have been listened to with respectful attention.

An hour or so had changed all that, and by the time Pete Blockey had fairly hidden himself and friend in the heart of the crowd, he knew that it came not to try but to hang. He was an old hand at such gatherings, and could not be fooled very badly on what was meant by a party on the war-path.

Sid Dare had arranged the guard; and as the duty was one that was not at all popular, he could not be very particular about his material. He just took for the most part what came to hand, and arranged matters as well as he could to suit the individuals. As there was a possible interest, running well up into coin, if the prisoner should be proved to be Captain Black, he intended to look after it himself, and had little doubt but that he could hold the rest to their work, mixed as it was with a little leaven he could trust. When the mob arrived he was at his post, and halted the forerunners with prompt sharpness.

"Stop right there," he sung out. "I wouldn't come any further for the present. This time in the morning you can't tell B from a bull's foot, and I wouldn't want to make any mistake, dropping worthy individuals that come climbing round this corral. What has broke loose now?"

"You hit it prezackly. It's mornin' now, an' we want ter git this thing over, so ther boyees kin git in a full day's work. We're ready fur Mister Man inside thar, so jest you stand aside fur ther law ter step in."

The spokesman gave a step or two in front of his colleagues, and revealed a form that was almost gigantic, and which Sid Dare recognized as belonging to Abilene Abe, the stranger who had been so active in getting up a row at the Saint's Rest, in the early part of the evening.

"I'm almost a stranger here myself, but I guess I keep the interest of the boys as much at heart as you do; and I would just advise them to let this contract alone till there is a chance to look at it all over and see who has the best bid in. If it is Captain Black we have here never fear but what he will get his deserts; and if he's not we don't want to swing him off till we get to the rights of the whole thing. So keep back, and let some one talk that belongs here. How do I know but what you are one of his pard, wanting to give him a chance to bolt when the door goes open? Say, boys, who knows this fellow, anyhow?"

"That's a good one!" responded Abe, in a tone that showed considerably less desire for a row than Dare had expected. "You fellers, say! Ain't ther a few thet knows Abilene Abe, an' kin speak a good word fur him? This hyar gent as is a-puttin' on frills bez lived hyar so long thet he's furgot who's thar old inhabitants."

There was a chorus of yells in answer to this appeal, showing that there were plenty there who either knew him, or were willing to vouch for him, on the strength of the common cause in which they were engaged.

Dare understood this all, and that if the prisoner got into those hands there would not be much chance for any one else. Still, he did not waver, though he cast a covert glance around in search of his own friends, who were somehow not to the fore.

"That may all be, but this camp put me here, along with some good men they thought they could trust, and told us to keep him right side up. We're going to do it. Those that don't like that platform had just better look the other way. You all hear me?"

"We hear yer; an' we're comin' fur you. Blaze away ef yer choose, but ef yer do I swar you'll hang 'long side of him. Ain't that so, boyees?"

An affirmative yell rose in answer to the appeal; and without the least hesitation Abilene Abe dashed forward, followed by the shouting gang.

Dare had nerve up to the limit, but beyond that he did not care to go. In the temper of the mob he did not doubt the threat would be religiously carried out; and though he and the couple of friends he could count on as being with him through thick and thin might have made a lively fight there could be no doubt about the ending. When the rush had almost reached him he gracefully drew aside; and saw it go crashing against the door of the calaboose.

The door was built to stay, and the first assault made no impression. The timbers did not even creak.

All the same the road was clear; and the only sound from within was what was taken for a muffled cry of alarm. As Snapshot Sam had been left with his hands tied, and there was no one else within, it was pretty plain that if Dare had thrown up his hand for good the mob could work its own sweet will.

"Say, thar, jist tote up yander log, an' give

a h'iste," ordered Abe. "Ther door's locked, an' ef Sid Dare's willin' ter stand aside we won't rub it in axkin' him ter open it. Thar, all ter-gether, an' away she goes."

Others thought of the battering-ram as soon as he did, and almost before he was done speaking the door went down and the mob went in—at least the leaders did.

Again a cry went up—this time of delight. In the furthest corner they could see a crouching figure.

"Hyar he is, boyees; blaze up with them torches an' show us a light. We'll see how ther man ov sand performs when we git him under ther rope. Ef he don't squeal my name ain't Abilene Abe. Don't all crowd in hyar! Thar's more room outside. Hold on thar, whar we kin all see."

The boys were pouring in so fast that the little room was already well filled, and there was hardly a chance for any one to get a sight of the prisoner, whom Abe had wrenched, by one powerful sweep, out of his corner. Of course there was not much use for him to struggle; but his utter non-resistance was almost a puzzle. Good men have lost all their grit before such a mob, but somehow it was not expected here, so early in the game.

There was a rushing and a twisting, and a swaying to and fro; and then the giant came pushing through the packed crowd, dragging after him the still unresisting form, toward the flaring torches that had made their appearance outside.

And just as he reached the threshold a voice, that somehow made itself distinctly audible above the roar of the crowd, dropped sharply in his ear the question:

"A moment, my friend. What are you doing with that man?"

Kate Chase was talking, and in either hand she held a cocked revolver.

"Bringin' him right out ter justice, marm, an' ef ye'r wise you'll stand outen ther road. This are men's work; an' it'll be blamed on healthy even fer a woman ter git in ther road."

"And more so still for the men that try to run the affair when they had better don't. There are some that will stand by me for a square deal, and I am a little army alone. What is all this about?"

"You oughtn't to kick. If you hadn't more luck than judgment I reckon that you would have gone up the flume, when you ran against him at Poison Pete's. It's ther sportive sport ez calls hisself Snapshot Sam. We hev ther bulge on him jest now; but ef thar's much foolin' 'round, you'll think you've turned a airtquake loose. Still, ef he's a friend ov yours, you kin hev ther corpse when we git through with it."

There was more mocking insolence in his tone than was safe to use with the fair mistress of the Saint's Rest, yet Kate gave no sign of being angered. On the contrary, she was looking sharply at the figure that was beginning to writhe in the grasp of the giant; and finally, as he ceased speaking, she burst into a laugh that was too clear not to be genuine.

"All right; take him along if you think he's worth the rope. I thought Angels' Flat had more brains than to turn out *en masse* at this time in the morning to hang such a worthless old rascal as Bobby Blue-nose. Don't you think he would keep until daylight?"

At her jeering words Abilene Abe looked at his man; and then was so dumfounded that he actually opened his fingers and staggered back. After that one glance there was no room for doubt.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SOMEBODY GETS LEFT.

THE moment that the prisoner felt himself out of the gripe that had closed on his shoulder until it seemed to be eating into the bone, he uttered a howl, and gave a spring that landed him just at Kate Chase's feet, where he crouched.

If the crowd laughed there would be a chance yet; and the crowd did laugh.

"Ef ye'r white, save me," he gasped. "I ain't done nothin', an' I hed to er I wouldn't be hyar now; an' I sw'ar I didn't move a finger. Turn yer shutin'-iron ther other way an' keep 'em off. I'm nothin' but er pore, missible sinner, aryhow."

It was the idea of the bummer appealing to a mite of a woman like Kate Chase, that tickled the crowd. Of course they didn't mean to give him up, but they halted, waiting for what was to follow.

"Thar's some gum-game 'bout this," interposed Abilene Abe, recovering himself, and everybody listened to hear what he had to say.

"I tho't that that festive cuss didn't slide outen ther way so quick fur nothin'. He's standin' in with Block jest ez sure ez eggs is eggs. He let ther boss out, an' put this ornery leetle pistle ov a galoot in. Let's hear how ther thing war done. I should jedge, man, yer don't want ter take much stock in him, an' ef yer do, an' want ter save his neck, ther best plan are ter make him talk."

"Oh, I'll talk till daylight ef you'll on'y hear me," retorted Bobby. "It war ther dog-gondest, low-downdest piece ov work ez yer ever heard on, an' they played it fine on ther old man; but Sid Dare didn't hev nothin' ter do with it. Ef

you gents'll on'y listen a leetle, you'll git ther hull story."

"Drive on, then, and let us know how it comes that ther Pistol Sharp war out, an' you war in."

"Easy 'nuff, fellers. Ther way ov it war this: Thar war a gang ov 'em—a hull gang—an' they caught me a-skulkin' round in ther bresh, 'cos I see'd that thar war a red-hot time in ther Flat, an' Bobby Blue-nose don't b'long in no sich ruckshuns. Ef I'd hed a fair show I mou't a-slaughtered a few, but I didn't know nothin' ov what war a-comin' till they had me foul, an' then it war too late. Thar war a gag in my chops an' a rag over my eyes, an' thar I war, not knowin' who had me er what they wanted. They jest carted me 'long like old rags, an' drug me when it got sorter close ter ther home base, an' next thing I knowed they war a-h'istin' me up, an' a lettin' ov me down, an' thar I war ag'in. Then I see'd ther hull game, fer ther boss, he sed, se he: 'Ef you jest keep your mouth shet you won't be hurt. Thar's a lot ov our gang in ther crowd, an' they'll see yer through when ther time comes; but jest now it's time we're arter. Mind! we'll be a-watchin' ov yer up above, an' ther fu'st whimper—daylight goes through yer.' An' that's ther hull blessed truth. I didn't make a sound; an' I'm hyar."

The vagabond might not have been there at the end of his story if it had not been for one artful suggestion.

Was there any truth in the story? and, if so, was Captain Black or any of his gang waiting in the crowd to back up the bummer when the time came? After hearing that, there was a general looking around to see if there was any man that answered to the ideal of what Black might be supposed to be.

When he had finished, and every one had time to take it in, Abilene Abe, who had seemed the most nonplused of all, made a step forward.

"That's a good yarn, Bobby, an' we're a-b'lievin' ov it, 'cause we can't do any better; but lie er no lie, it don't make any difference; you're goin' ter hang in the place ov a better man, 'less he jumps in mighty quick. Jest stand back, Mrs. Chase, an' ef yer don't want ter see how this camp settles her bills, you'd better git under kiver at ther Saint's Rest."

"Oh, don't yer go!" yelled the bummer, groveling nearer, until he was again at the feet of the little woman. "Keep 'em off! You kin do it; an' you wouldn't go back on pore, pore ole Bobby!"

"Sorry I can't help you, old man; but the crowd is against you, and they would swallow me if I tried. Better fold your arms and go up the flume!"

She spoke coldly; and it seemed time to disclaim any patronage of his cause, for an angry growl was beginning to run around the circle. The fact was that the muzzle of one of her revolvers had all along been pointed at Abilene Abe. Was it meant, or was it simply an accident? There were reasons why it was not best to push the question too soon, and other reasons why it was not safe to take many chances. Her words seemed straight enough, but there might be something behind them, even if Blue-nose couldn't see it.

"Yer ain't white ef yer turn me over ter them devils. Ef yer won't see me out, jest shute me through ther brain-box; but don't let 'em rope me. Gimme one ov yer shutin'-irons an' I'll do it meself; I sw'ar I will."

"Thanks, but cartridges cost money, and it's a trouble to reload. I'll save my pill-boxes till I need them. Maybe some one in the crowd will accommodate you. The Angels of the Flat would as soon see a felo-de-se as a hanging-match. Any one here got a spare iron?"

She looked over the crowd as she spoke, and to the surprise of every one a harsh voice answered:

"Hyar ye be. Ketch, Bobby, it's yer last chance."

And right at the kneeling bummer some one tossed a pair of revolvers.

Every one wanted to see who owned that voice, and looked that way—without much result.

It was only a momentary wandering; but when they looked back again there was a change that the biggest fool there recognized with a thrill as meaning business.

The man that, with a quick, underhand jerk, tossed the pistols, was no fool, though probably Ernest Roget was the only one there who understood that the first letter of his name was Plumb Center Pete.

"Now scatter, boyee. I'm a-holdin' two thousand ov his money, an' blamed ef I ain't earned it. You'll see a heap ov sand eat er a heap ov fur fly. You hear me?"

No one noticed them just now—the transformation scene was too interesting.

Right into two outstretched hands the revolvers dropped, and the bummer groveled no longer.

"Ha! ha! heeled ag'in! Yer caught me once moultin', but try it ag'in an' see whar ther laugh comes in. Down in front thar. I'm Snapshot Sam from 'way down, an' I'm business from ther word go."

He shot as carelessly as he laughed, and Abi-

lene Abe rolled back, hard hit. Then he sprang into the crowd, struck right and left, stooped, bounded, leaped, cleared the press, and under the fire of a dozen revolvers flung himself lodily into the mesquites and disappeared. It was all done so quickly that for a moment the crowd actually thought he had been blown away.

Only for a moment. Then, with a hideous yell, a dozen men followed into the shadows in hot pursuit, while the rest of the mob spread themselves along the trail.

Three persons only did not follow. Ernest Roget made a step, and then felt the gripe of his companion on his arm.

"I wouldn't, pard. You've see'd 'bout all thar is in that load ov fun. Snapshot Sam's free-footed, an' got a brace of irons that kin sling lead jest whar he wants it. Therer may be a stiff er two ter berry in ther mornin'; but he'll be very much alive, an' don't you furgit it. Ef I ain't mistook, him an' me's on ther same trail, an' I on'y wished I'd dropped to ther racket sooner. Mebbe old man Lake'll kin out jay-bird vit."

"What do you know about old man Lake?" queried Roget, turning on his friend, with sudden suspicion.

"Ez much, mebbe, as you do about his darter. Ef you're willin' ter do him a good turn thar she stands; tell her ter look out fur Captain Black, an' not ter trust Johnny Chase funder than she kin see him. They're a-calin' ov ther last turn afore ther bank closes, an' they'll be mighty desprit."

"Don't worry yourself about John Chase."

The little woman was near enough to hear every word; and Blockey had not attempted to lower his tones. If he wanted to make her speak he could not have devised a better plan.

"He has a hole through him and cannot act just when he is needed most. Will you two take his place?"

"Will a duck swim?" answered Pete hastily.

"But whar yer goin'?"

"Straight to the Big Hope. The end is about here; will you follow me?"

CHAPTER XXXII.

PLUMB CENTER PETE DROPS.

"YOU bet," was the hearty answer to the question of the little woman; and then Blockey hastily turned aside and dropped himself by a motionless figure he knew to be that of Abilene Abe.

"I ain't jest sure ef he's dead," he continued, "an' I wouldn't like ter leave even a worthless critter like him ef thar war a chance ter give him a leetle longer hold on life. Yes. He's a-breathin'. We must drag him in somewhar. Ketch hold."

The man from Abilene had been totally overlooked, and it was just a chance that Plumb Center Pete's eyes had fallen on him. Roget responded promptly to his request, and Kate Chase made no objection, though she may have looked impatient at the idea of losing the time needed to care for the wounded man.

"You can't carry that mountain of flesh all the way to Sammy Sanders's; and that is the only place to put him. There's one sick man at the Rest now; and I wouldn't like to trust the two together. You had better load him up on my mustang—if the brute hasn't taken fright and cleared out."

The mustang, however, was just where she had left him, with the reins hanging over his head as she had flung them when she leaped from the saddle to approach the calaboose on foot. She brought him to the spot, and with a combined effort they raised the limp body into the saddle. A cursory glance had showed Pete that the fellow was hard hit, but with the chances for living in his favor. He hung heavily in his seat, and it was as much as the two could do, now and then, to hold him in his place. Now and then, too, he groaned.

Kate Chase tramped on behind, showing very little concern. She was thinking of something else, anyhow, and she knew that this man had been detailed for his part in her abduction that very night.

At the station Sanders was alone with his factotum, Jack Biggs, and required repeated assurances that there would be no racket over the wounded man before he would consent to entertain him. After that he entered heartily into the case.

"You needn't go a step funder fur help—I'll take him off yer hands. I've served a turn at ther doctor biz, like everything else; an' ef I can't pull him through thar ain't no use in tryin'. Jest so his pards don't come a-whoopin' round arter I've did my best. Mebbe I kin pull him through, an' mebbe I can't; but my level best'll be ez good ez that of any other man, ef he hez a sheepskin ez long ez Mrs. Chase's face."

Mrs. Chase was watching with a serious look, as Sanders examined his patient. He had kept this phase of his education to himself, and if she had expressed surprise to see how deftly he took hold of his work it would have been no wonder; but she seemed only interested in the fate of the man under his charge, and as Sammy shook his head gravely, with what seemed a burlesque on professional style, a little cry escaped from her

lips, that was totally unlike the usually iron-nerved little rustler.

For the life of him, Roget could not resist the opportunity to comfort her.

"Come away, Dorris; this is no place for you. He is in good hands, and you have, or had, your own personal affairs that you dare not forget. If I am to help you, let us go now."

"You are right. What should that man's suffering be to me? Come. I must go home. Another sufferer awaits me there."

He hardly knew her voice when he heard it again. It sounded once more like it used to when she bewitched him in the early days of their acquaintance.

Without a word he followed her as she turned away, and Blockey came just at their heels in an unusually solemn mood, for him. He couldn't have seemed more concerned if it had been his own work, and he had killed his mother-in-law by mistake.

But once outside there was a change that more than surprised Roget. Pete pushed up to Kate Chase and spoke in a tone so low that Ernest barely caught the words.

"Ye'r' right, miss. Thar's su'thin' durned queer 'bout it. I ain't knowin' ov ther parties ez you be, but I kin see with half a eye thar's su'thin' rotten in Denmark. Who are Sammy Sanders?"

"So you are asking that question already; and to think that often as I have seen him, this is the first time it ever occurred to me. Oh, I must have been blind. Do you think that he suspects?"

"Suspects what?"

Roget didn't understand. He had seen nothing except a rather uncouth-looking specimen of a Western jack-of-all-trades feeling over a dying tough, and then, assisted by one of his still rougher employees, bandaging his wounds.

"Never mind, pard. Jest keep up with ther piercession, an' you'll know when you git thar. I ain't jest so sure ez ter what ter make ov it, but I'm willin' ter learn. You kin trust this hyar young man, Miss Lake, all ther way thar an' back ag'in. Ez fur me, my face speaks fur itself, an' ez I took ther chance ter heel myself where Abe's guns war lyin' round loose, I kin back yer game fur a reasonable extent; an' it sorter 'pears thet I'll hev ther chance. Now that Johnny are outen ther way I wouldn't be surprised ef they went fur yer solid. He's bin a-standin' up fur yer all along."

"He ought to," she answered, dryly. Then, her voice changing again: "We have ridden over the town rough-shod, and now every dog will bark at our heels when our luck seems to be running the wrong way. One thing is certain. Snapshot Sam is not Captain Black. Who is he?"

"Blue-nose Bobby, ov course."

"Hardly. Unless I am away off in my calculations the original bummer is wrapped up in a blanket in yonder building, and the Pistol Sharp only gave a fair imitation. We must meet him again. There has been some mistake—what it was I half suspect. Yet where to look for him?"

"At the Big Hope. Ef you an' Johnny counts on holdin' on ter that you'd better git thar afore Eli does. Things seem revolv'in' 'round that, an' I kinder feel curious ter know how it are."

"I am going—I must go now. If I had not already made it a necessity, I might let it go, and see what more could be done and learned here."

"But the Triplet fortune—the half million. Won't you fling that away without an effort? Is there nothing that I can do to make up for my stretched ear-strings?"

"Never mind the Triplet fortune. If all got safely to the Big Hope that start for it, things may be in better shape than you or I dreamed of half an hour ago. I must see Johnny a moment. His nerve may keep him going enough to manage matters here."

They had been moving as they talked, until they had come to the Saints' Rest.

The building looked dark and desolate. It had been closed when the crowd had fairly thinned out, for, of course, after what had happened that evening the assistants would not have thought of running a game in the absence of the proprietor. Besides that, they had taken a hand in the fun themselves, and could have given a dozen very good reasons why they should have left the Best Chance practically to take care of itself.

The little woman only ran in for a moment. When she came out Roget could see that her spirits had raised several degrees.

"He is not as badly hurt as I feared, and though he cannot go with us he can do almost as much good here. There is no use trying to cover our trail if any one is watching us, as 'most likely there is, if everybody has not been drawn away after the Pistol Sharp. Let them come, though. So that we can keep them behind us until we overtake a friend or two that took the trail before these last developments. You understand, Ernest, that your life may be in a good deal of danger and you not able to do much good? I do not want to drive you back; I do not want to encourage you to come. Act as you think best."

"I am with you," he quietly responded; and

there wasn't a chance to doubt that he meant what he said.

They went out quietly, but boldly, undismayed by the journey that was before them; and for some time pursued their way almost noiselessly under the paling stars. Even Blockey was able to be silent, while Roget, in spite of his dogged obstinacy, understood that by the time they got through with the night's work he would have had enough of Western adventure to last him for an average life.

"Hush!" hoarsely whispered Blockey, at last. "I thort I heard some one on the trail ahead ov us. We ain't so ding-blasted sure ov meetin' friends thet we need be in a hurry 'bout shakin' hands with ther strangers in ther dark. Ef we go keerful we may crawl up on 'em an' find out what's ther kind of a lay-out they hev on ther spread."

The caution came just in time. With their ears set to catch any sound they heard a faint cry that might otherwise have escaped them.

"A woman's voice!" exclaimed Roget. "Who is it? Where are we? What can it mean? What sort of a country is this, about Angels' Flat, anyway?"

"Best section fer berryin' tenderfeet I ever sot eyes on," answered Plumb Center Pete, in some heat, but still under his breath; "an' ef you ain't a leetle more keerful we'll all hev chances ter take up claims. Stay hyar a bit an' I'll drive on an' see."

Kate Chase enforced the request by laying her hand lightly on the young man's shoulder, bringing him to a sudden halt by her side, while Blockey glided away more noiselessly than Roget would have believed possible without seeing it done.

He did not waste time over it, either. In five minutes he was listening breathlessly to a conversation that surely was not intended for his ears.

"Sure, Jimmy, we couldn't foind a swater place fur plantin' av her, an' ol'm toired a-totin' av her that me back's clane bruck ontirely. He wor bluddy partick'ler ter have no muss along ther trail; but why ain't a hole in ther ground here just ez good ez old Ben Gurley's owld shaft ter drap her in?"

"I ain't foolin' much with ther boss jest now. I kinder thort he'd give us one fur lettin' that Pistol Sharp git the inside track, an' I guess he would ef he hedn't found use fur us jest when we come to report how things war. He said Ben Gurley's ole shaft, an' Ben Gurley's ole shaft sho are, ef it takes a leg. Ef she squirms hit her another bat over ther head: but dry up on that fool talk. Ther boss hez a mighty long arm."

"And so hev I!" exclaimed Plumb Center Pete, a quick bound bringing him almost within touching distance. "Hands up, then! You hear me?"

The bound was just a little too quick and too far. He had Mickey O'Brien covered; but Jim the dropper heard him as he came, and was wise in the wiles of warfare. He darted forward so that Blockey had him on his flank before he noticed the shift. As Pete covered O'Brien, the dropper covered him and pulled trigger. There was a little shoot of flame and Plumb Center Pete fell.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

DELLA VENNER OBTAINS SOME INFORMATION.

It is about time to look a little closer after a certain other little woman, who came to Angels' Flat to conquer. After the experience she had the journey to the Big Hole did not seem so unattended with danger that she would care to attempt it again and by night, without a better body-guard than that which clustered around her and escorted her into the Flat. She was very well satisfied, after securing the arrest of Snapshot Sam, to retire to her slumbers in what seemed the comparative safety of Sammy Sanders's hotel.

It may be as well to say that whatever else she knew about the Pistol Sharp she was in earnest when she denounced him as Captain Black, and thought that her own safety was assured when she saw him led away to durance—and probably something else in the morning.

At the time the mob broke for the calaboose she was sound asleep, and it would have taken something more than the moderate noise on the street to awaken her. After all that she had gone through—which she had met with so much nerve—the reaction came and she slept like a log.

It seemed to her that her eyes had just closed, when she opened them again; and then it was hard for her to believe that it was not a nightmare that had hold of her. She was just as helpless in hand, foot and voice as though an incubus had paralyzed her—and she was just as full of terror.

After a moment or two of effort she knew that it was something worse. She could not cry out because she was gagged and she could not move hands or feet because they were too securely tied. She had noted, when she retired the night before, the thinness of the partitions, the flimsiness of the door; but thought she could fasten the latter so securely that it would be im-

possible to enter the room without arousing her. Now she knew that it had been done, and that it was only when the gripe on her shoulder tightened purposely that she opened her eyes.

There was a man in the room, and though there was something about him that seemed familiar, she could not recognize his face by the faint light of the little lamp, nor the low undertones of his voice when he spoke.

"Sorry for you, miss," was what he said. "If I had been in your place I don't think I would have been fool enough to risk the danger here for all you had a chance to make out of it. It's a very bad place, a very dangerous place, and as I have a sincere interest in your welfare I think of seeing you safely out of it."

She could answer nothing in words, but her eyes shot furious glances. Fortunately for the intruder they could not slay; though they seemed to answer.

"Yes, my dear, I understand all that you would say, so you needn't trouble yourself to find words for the occasion. I *did* think I might need you here to give evidence in the matter of Snapshot Sam. That is settled by this time, one way or another, and now I've got you on my hands. Something must be done with you, for you are not wanted here. I can't say that I am willing to trust you very extensively, but if you'll promise to make no trouble you will certainly have a more comfortable time of it; though it makes very little difference to me."

His words were soft enough, but there was something in his eyes that filled Della with unspeakable horror. If she could have torn the gag from her mouth she would have told him something that it might have been for his interest to know; but he had done his work far too well for that.

"I understand. You needn't say another word. Even if Sammy Sanders could catch on to what is going on in his house he is all alone—the rest are at the hanging bee at the other end of town—and I could get away with a dozen like him. As for mercy, and all that fudge—I'm the most merciful man you ever come across—when there's nothing else suits me better. Just fold your arms, close your eyes, and resign yourself to fate. It will all be the same a thousand years from now. I only want to give you a cautions. A live woman can locomote without much assistance, while a dead woman can't stir a peg unless you help her; but I'd sooner carry a dead body who was willing, than a live one that wasn't. And I always do as I want to. You sabbe?"

A little quiver showed that, in the midst of her terror, she had caught his meaning. Then she closed her eyes and was quiet: if he wanted to strike, she was ready for the blow.

"That's better," laughed the man. "I don't want to make a muss around here. If Sammy Sanders found Captain Black had opened a slaughter-house in his best bedroom, he would go too wild for anything. I just wanted you to understand—that's all. Come in, boys. The little lady is ready, and I understand her that she's willing to trust her valuable life in your hands. If she goes back on the arrangement, you know what to do; and do it mighty sudden. Now off with her to headquarters, and tell the lieutenant I'll be with him before morning."

And this was the way Della Venner came to be traveling along the trail toward the Big Hope, under the guidance and control of two of as big ruffians as ever skirmished around the outskirts of Angels' Flat.

She went with them because she was bewildered, and for the time utterly cowed; and if sorely tried nature had not at last given out she might have gone on to the end. Without any intention on her part the gag worked loose, and as she suddenly sunk, utterly exhausted, her nerves and strength all broken up, she uttered the one little cry that had reached the ears of Plumb Center Pete.

After that she knew nothing more until, as if in a dream, she heard the sharp report of a pistol, and saw as she looked a man go down.

Mr. Blockey, however, was not exactly a novice, and had a knack of dropping out of harm's way, and shooting as he dropped. It was a very close call, and he was just in time. The lead that would have gone straight to his heart went hissing just over his head.

Before Jim, the dropper, knew that he had missed his aim, or had time to try again, Blockey had him down and dead, and Mickey O'Brien in fit condition to pray for, and making a fair effort to do something in that line himself, as Plumb Center Pete's fingers closed around his throat, while he exclaimed:

"All right hyar; I've got ther deck clared, an' you kin come for'rards an' see what's bin goin' on."

Kate Chase was already on the way, for the moment she heard the shot she bounded fearlessly forward, followed by Roget.

"What is it? Are there more? Can I help you?"

"I guess I got 'em all apart; but thar's a woman somewhar 'round that's had a narrer escape. I don't want ter waste ca'tridges, so you jest look her up while I'm a-chokin' ther soul outen this galoot."

Silently Della Venner rose up before them,

and it was not too dark to see why it was that she did not speak.

It took but a moment to set her free, and then she stood trembling and half-supported by Kate, while Roget, at Blockey's shoulder, was debating whether to counsel moderation or to advise him to finish the job.

"On my soul, I swear I believe I have met both of these scoundrels once before to-night. If I'm not mistaken in the sound of his voice this is the fellow Snapshot Sam and I left tied up to a tree. It's a great pity that he got loose."

"Ther pity war that Snapshot Sam didn't finish ther job while he war at it. I ain't pre-zactly that kind. When I do git goin' I'm a sinner on wheels," snorted Blockey. "But I'd like ter know what this are all about, aryhov."

"Yes," interrupted Kate, turning the face of the woman by her side up toward the first straggling beams of the coming day. "I may know it all, but I'd like to be sure. Who are you?"

"I—I am Della Venner," was the weakly uttered reply.

"Della Venner? That is false—false as your own false heart! If there is such a woman, a daughter of Simon Venner, who first claimed the Big Hope mine, I am she—Della Venner, myself. Now, who are you?"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A WOMAN THAT CAN SHOOT.

"It is false! I *am* the daughter of Simon Venner!" exclaimed the supposititious Della. "You want to rob me of my inheritance. It has been the intention of you and your villainous husband to do that all along. I'll proclaim the truth from the housetops, though. I'll let the world know that you are in league with Captain Black, of the road-agents. I'll fight you to the last."

"I am glad to see that you are truly grateful for what we have done for you; but do you think that if there was a word of truth in the charges you are making that you would ever have a chance to make the proclamation? Now I don't know who you are, and I don't even say that your name is not Venner. All I insist on is that you are not the daughter of the man who owned the Big Hope, and that you were aware of that when you started for Angels' Flat. I *did* think that you were in league with Captain Black, but I see now that I was mistaken, and for that reason I cannot understand what brought you here on this wild-goose chase—unless, indeed, you are—"

She stopped, and looked keenly at the woman, whose face was looking strangely wan and haggard in the straggling light of daybreak. It was a face suggestive of paint and powder and disguise. A wicked face, perhaps, though not a depraved one. To the surprise of Kate Chase—as we may still call her—it was Ernest Roget that gave the answer:

"Elsie Kane. Is that the name you are trying to think of?"

"The very name; but how did you come to know it? Is she a friend of yours? You seem to have arrived at the same time, and I am not sure you were not making cause-common until you found that the game was lost. Are you going to betray her too?"

The words were so unexpectedly bitter that Roget was more than surprised; he was at least angered.

"You seem bent on misunderstanding, and though now it can but make but little difference to me I will make this one more explanation, and then take my leave of you forever. So far as I know I never saw her until we met the other evening at the station. She asked me for aid, and I would only give her advice. I was with the man Snapshot Sam when he rescued her from the clutches of Captain Black, and I heard his exclamation at sight of her. How he knew her name, or if he did, I know not. Ask her. Perhaps she will tell it. Now, as for me, I am done with you and your mysteries. I shall leave you to your own devices, and whether you live or die is nothing to me, since I have found that you were wicked clean through."

"It makes no difference what name thieves and vagabonds may apply; it makes no difference whether you hold the same opinion as they. Chance threw into your way some little knowledge of a floating half million, and you are willing to try any and every means to get a share of it. In spite of that, I am willing some day, when it can be shown safely to others, that you should know the whole truth. Meantime, you are welcome to go where and as soon as you choose. I can trust Mr. Blockey for an hour or two, and by that time I hope to be safe with my friends. As for this woman, she must go with us. At present it is not safe to have her at large; but when I have once drawn her teeth by showing who she really is and is not, she can go her own course and welcome."

"And how will you do that?" interposed the woman, who had been listening eagerly to the war of words. "Think you that your words will go further than my words and proofs? I expected to meet opposition when I made up my mind to look after my birthright, and I

came prepared to fight it out to the bitter end. The proof! the proof!"

"Simple enough to confound you. Simon Venner lives, and if I mistake not greatly what is happening in the town left behind us, as Simon Venner he will henceforth dare to show himself. We are going to him now."

"Ah! And—who is he?"

The question seemed a wild one to two of the audience; by the third its import was more easily understood.

"You will know better when you see him."

"An' mighty glad 'll I be when that thar inter-woo kins off," interposed Blockey. "Thar's a tramplin' of feet in the distance, an' ef me ears don't go back on me it sounds like a gang comin' from ther Big Hope. It may be a wheen ov honest miners, an' it may be Captain Black an' his tigers; it may be Snapshot Sam, an' it may be ther gerloots that started out ter lynch him. Any way, I ain't sure ez I'm yearnin' ter meet 'em; but I'll stay by yer ef yer sez so. What's it ter be? Tell us ther size ov it, quick."

"Stay right here. It is daylight now, and that puts a different face on the matter. The real men of the mine or the town will think twice before they interfere with us; and as to Captain Black, he is behind us, more's the pity. Sudden death would only be too good for him, now that I have run him down and know who he is."

"That's good ernuf; but do yer count on doin' all ther lead sluggin', or must I chip in acordin' ter ther stakes on ther board, an' ther size ov my hand? I want a p'inter in time; an' then I kin speak fur meself, and I reckon fur this young man. Ef he don't stay he'll have ter settle with his Uncle Fuller fur drawin' the wool over his eyes, an' makin' b'lieve he war a man ov sand. Jest trust me, an' trust him."

"Follow my lead, if you choose. The grand explosion had to come some day, perhaps it is here now. If it is, perhaps it would be better if our forces weren't quite so widely scattered. But it's too late to alter that. We will stand our ground."

Though not an expert in such matters, and by no means sure of the real position the Chases held at the Flat, Roget was wise enough to see that there was a possibility for a tough time. With a corpse and two prisoners on hand their very position was not so easy to explain.

At the same time Blockey had not missed his temper very far when he vouched for him; and when Kate Chase stepped forward toward the coming crowd, Ernest Roget with hands on his weapons, stood right at her shoulders.

"Halt, there!" she exclaimed, her voice ringing out clear and full upon the early morning.

"No nearer, please, until we know who you are. There are wolves abroad, and we intend to keep them away from the corral."

There were at least a dozen men in the gang, and they were coming on in no good humor. Some of them Kate knew by sight, others were strangers. They might perhaps have overlooked her altogether if she had not so boldly challenged them, but at hearing her there was a momentary faltering followed by a headlong, forward rush.

"Scoop 'em, boys! The girl is king-pin of the crowd, and there's millions in her if we work it right. Hands up, my dainty damsel, or bite lead, same ez if you were a man!"

She recognized the fellow as one who had been at the dingle, in the early part of the night acting as Captain Black's lieutenant. Whether or no these men were of the would-be lynchers of Snapshot Sam, they were certainly of the outlaws.

"Back!" she exclaimed once more, and was raising her hand when, with a sudden, cat-like bound Elsie Kane sprung upon her, forcing down the arm that was already half outstretched to shoot.

"Help! help!" she shouted as she did so, and waving her hand frantically.

"She has killed two men, she would kill me. Save me from her."

The insane act of treachery might have worked bitter harm had it not been that Plumb Center Pete, once committed to a fight, was wise enough to choose his own vantage ground. As Roget moved up to support the woman he had loved Blockey bounded away a dozen paces and threw himself down by the side of the trail, his hands held straight out, and ready for work. When he saw the act of Elsie he waited for no other signal but just glancing at the leader, of the assailing party he pulled trigger.

At the report the man spun round, staggered and dropped, while Roget was hurling Elsie back to the ground, and Kate Chase, working thumb and finger so fast that it did not seem possible she was taking aim, sent three shots before the mob turned and fled.

She hardly thought they were safely rid of the lot until as they got beyond pistol range from her station, and set up a yell that showed they intended the repulse to be only temporary, there rose a cry from the other side of them, and three or four reports that said aid was coming from some unexpected quarter.

"Spather it into the thirty spalpeens, bad 'cess to 'em!" shouted Ed Cahill, his brogue about a hundred per cent. more pronounced

than ever, while Elder McKinzie was shooting with Scotch persistency and superhuman wau of result, until he was assured that the way was open.

"Back to the Flat!" said Cahill, as he came up panting from a short but rapid run.

"The boodle is there, an' if we don't make tall time Captain Black, the devil take his sowl, will get away wid it!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

A MAN OF STRAW.

MISS DELLA VENNER, starting out under the guidance of Mickey O'Brien and Jimmy, the dropper, left no vacancy behind her. Scarcely had they slunk away with her when Miss Della appeared on the scene—the young lady with the bandaged arm, who had so unceremoniously made her escape about the time the large deputation of citizens was looking for her with some anxiety, to compare her with her double.

There was certainly something of a resemblance, and as there were no visible traces of the hard usage of which she had complained, it was possible that Angels' Flat could once more be deceived.

"Well, my dear, do you think that this time you have fixed it beyond peradventure? Because, if there is any more failure, I will feel very much like throwing up my cards for good and all. The Angels here are a queer set, and in spite of the thick sprinkling of backers you have in the mob I am vastly afraid that they would elevate us both if they once tumbled to the rights of the game. And I'm not so sure the game is worth the powder."

"Nor I," answered the captain, a little gloomily.

"Sorry, for once, to hear you agree with me. It's possible that I can pass for the amiable Elsie—who, just now, must be as badly muddled as we—but I am not sure of late that she is the correct heir. Simon Venner may have left the Big Hope to his daughter, but I am afraid we are a little off in our figures as to who he was. It was very unfortunate that he disappeared before you got sight of him."

"Very," answered the captain, reflectively. "I wouldn't wonder if we had been twice fooled already. Simon Venner is *not* dead, and when I find him I'll kill him. Strange how like an innocent I have run into a double game and been beaten all 'round. The first letter of his true name was Lake, or I am a liar from 'way back."

"Then it was scarcely worth while—are you sure the young lady has *permanently* retired from competition?"

"As certain as I can be of a job I am not doing myself. I will bet stamps that if you search for her presently in Ben Gurley's old shaft you will find her corpus."

"Hush! I don't want to know too much. But have you looked up Katrina? No? Well, I didn't want to harm her, but I had to get away, and I judge that, as usual, I did the job up thoroughly."

"A little too thoroughly, perhaps. Women like her are scarce, and I don't see how the station is to be run without her."

"And I don't see, so far as we are concerned, that it makes much difference whether the station is run or not. She had an uncomfortable gleam in her eye that made me fear she might recognize me later on, when it would be awkward. You can do as you choose about it, but it seems to me it would be better to stand the first shock of the discovery before the crowd gets in again."

"You are right, as usual. Wait until I make a few changes, and we will go together to look up the mystery of what has become of the cock. I need her dreadful bad. Indeed I do."

He went out when he ceased speaking, and the woman waited patiently for his return—though the time was a good deal longer than they had anticipated. Just then Abilene Ale was at the threshold, and fully fifteen minutes elapsed before Sammy Sanders, or his ghost, came bustling into the room.

"I was just in time—and this gives me the chance I wanted. Couldn't you look up Katrina for me? I need her to help with a wounded man that has been brought in and left under my care. You know where to find her; and if anything goes wrong, scream."

"Certainly. I am the screaming kind—a timid, blushing creature. Oh, how shall I stand it to be wandering around this house alone at night? Be ready to come if I do call."

Then she went off, and up to the garret-like room with a readiness that showed she was no stranger to the way, while her companions waited to hear the cry that was to bring him to her side.

It did not come.

He waited wearily, though he did not suspect anything had gone wrong until she unexpectedly reappeared.

"Well?" he said sharply.

"I can't say whether it is well or ill—you decide. The aged damsel is not there."

A muttered curse arose to his lips.

"Don't be unduly excited. If Katrina is not there, some one else is; and in almost as bad a plight as I thought I had left her."

"Some one else? Who? Curses on it! do you think you were seen?"

"None other than that pest of the camp, that irrepressible bummer, Blue-nose Bobby. And he is bound hand and foot, and rolled up in the bed-clothes. Do you want him?"

The man uttered a cry of delight.

"Good enough! Blue-nose Bobby! And do I want him? Why, he's the hub of the whole concern. But I forget. Of course I want him, if he don't get away. This time we will go together. I want to see for myself. If you are right I'll hand him out to hang in the next five minutes, if I can get enough of the boys together on short notice to do the job. There will be no more foolishness."

He scarcely thought that she had made any mistake, yet he could hardly believe that she told the truth. As they went along she explained how she had gone boldly up to the bed and turned down the cover from the face of the motionless figure, and was actually struck dumb to see that a transformation had miraculously taken place. Without waiting to question how he came there—it was evident that he was alive—she came back to apprise Sanders of the strange fact.

Of course neither suspected that this was the original Bobby, while the bummer at the calaboose was a mere fraud. It was really laughable to see the care with which the two approached the bedside. If Snapshot Sam lay there, there was no telling what desperate scheme he might be nursing. Though he had done very little at the Flat, yet he had a reputation that was immense, and the man who had been posing as Sammy Sanders did not intend that he should try any tricks with him. With hammer back and finger on the trigger he peered down into the battered face, trying to make sure that the bummer was as helpless as he looked.

Not a muscle could Bobby move, not an intelligible sound could he utter. The work had been too completely done to allow the thought that it was some dodge of his own. The two were satisfied that the fellow was entirely in their power; but how he came so, was a question that it was necessary to have answered. There had been something going on that the worthy proprietor knew nothing about.

He took in the situation fairly before he said a word to his companion, who was watching him curiously.

"Do yer think he's ther man?" he asked, deliberately.

On his guard, he had reassumed the curious drawl that belonged to his impersonation of Sanders.

"You ought to know. If you don't, ask him. He'll tell the truth—maybe. His countenance don't look altogether familiar; but then, who can tell what he looks like? I can't; and if I have made no mistake, I ought to know. You're not afraid to give him a chance to shout, are you?"

"I'm afeard ov no man when I hev him in front ov me. I'll let ther poor devil hev a chance ter tell what's bin goin' on. Mebbe he kin explain what's become ov Katrina, an' what he's doin' thar."

He acted as he spoke, and Bobby found himself at liberty to talk—a privilege he did not seem to care to avail himself of, if indeed he had sufficient strength, after the unintentional roughness of his handling.

"Perhaps you don't understand the situation," said the young lady, mildly. "This spot is supposed to be sacred to the cook of the hotel, who just now is wanted very badly to assist in taking care of a wounded man. When I came to call her, I found you in her place. To say nothing of the fact that the people here are wild to hang you for various moral delinquencies in the past, you will be treated without mercy if the present is not satisfactorily explained. What have you to say for yourself?"

"Notter durned thing!" spluttered Bobby. "Ef anything hez happened to ther angel what ye're speakin' ov, I might ez well lay me down an' die—I'll starve sure, arhyow."

"Tut! tut! man; that won't do. Where is she?"

"That's w'ot I'd like ter onderstand. Guess she's jest gone with er han'sumer man, though I didn't see no feller about. It war another she-male ez carried her off; a thunderin' likely-lookin' heifer, ez put me whar you found me, an' ef it warn't yerself it war another jest so like ez one pea an' two peas. Say, it warn't you ez sot up this game on pore ole Bobby? Ef it war, jest ontie me loose an', we'll call it square. It's a mighty good joke on ther ole man, but ain't yer kerryin' it a leetle too fur?"

Pity, or some other motive, seemed to prompt her to act, and at the address she moved forward. In another moment she would have loosened his hands.

"Wait a bit," said her companion, looking at the two in a suspicious, unpleasant way. "How do I know but what this is the truth this scoundrel is telling, and that you and he are once more in partnership. By heavens! I have showed you whether I trusted you in the past, but I want to know something about the pres-

ent. If you try to play me for a fool I'll kill you both."

"Captain Black, you are a fool!"

The retort was short and sharp, and it hit harder than was meant. In an instant he was deadily cool.

"Perhaps I am, but I'll run the chance. I'll begin with him, and over his corpse you can have a chance to explain!"

There was murder in his eye as he swung around from her toward the bummer on the bed, and Bobby saw it. He uttered a howl, and made a sudden convulsive effort, the result of which surprised even himself. Like a ball he flew from bed, the cords dropping away as he tore for the little window at the end of the loft.

Captain Black dropped the character of Sammy Sanders then forever. He thrust away his revolver, and, with a gleaming knife in his hand, bounded after Bobby.

"Curse you, if you are a man, stop! I'll give you a chance, but I'll have your heart's blood, all the same. Are you afraid to meet me?"

Then he flung his knife. That missed its aim by a hair's breadth as Bobby stumbled through the hatchway, and came to the floor below with a crash.

With only an instant's delay, to snatch the knife that quivered in the roof, the captain followed; and as he reached the lower regions a man darted at him, exclaiming:

"I'm Snapshot Sam, the Pistol Sharp, and I've come to stay. Ah! I have you!"

At the same time a hand was laid on the shoulder of the young woman, who had followed down.

"Don't be rash, madam; I am plain John Chase, and I wouldn't hurt you for the world; but the game is up."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

SNAPSHOT SAM GETS EVEN.

THE false Della Venner, at the touch on her shoulder, wheeled like lightning, her one hand going to her breast, while the other sought to toss aside the hand that was on her. So quick and strong were her movements that, with nine men out of ten, they would have been successful.

John Chase was a tenth man, though. Her wrists seemed to drop into his clutches just as naturally as though she had placed them there; and when she tried to wrench them away no vise could have held them tighter.

"Easy, my child," said Johnny, in his silkenest tones. "The gentlemen want fair play, and I have arranged they shall have it. Don't force me to any disagreeable harshness. Pray allow them to fight it out; and you and I will stand back and see what's going on. If the party known as Snapshot Sam don't get away with him, then I will have my say-so. Between us, I think it a safe bet that he will go into the corral."

"That's your idea of fair play, is it?" she hissed. "Two on one, and he at a disadvantage."

"Oh, no. One down and another come on. When he sets up for a chief he ought to be willing for that much. I would, and I'm only Johnny Chase, with a hole in my back—that he put there."

"You—traitor twice over! It's a pity he couldn't have held steadier."

"Or that he didn't give me a square show right along. When he played dirt it left me free to call his sand. Now, dry up. I want to see what's the game they are playing. If I'm not mistaken, it will be worth the looking at."

As she did not answer he just gathered both her wrists in one hand and turned.

He could not have turned more opportunely. At that moment through the door that led to the bar-room came Jack Biggs, the bouncer of the station, and a shot-gun.

When the two came together, it was a sign that war had broken out; and that he did not mean to hesitate to declare on which side he was going to fight.

As he crossed the threshold the muzzle went up, in a movement to cover Snapshot Sam, who stood facing the man whom the Flat had known only as Sanders.

Biggs just then had a clear case in his favor, and if he pulled trigger there couldn't be a lynch court formed that wouldn't acquit him, for the Pistol Sharp had both hands out, and at the end of each one was a six-shooter.

"Hurrah, boys, hyar he are, an' in business ag'in!"

And then, above the answering yell that pealed in from without, came the crack of Chase's pistol, and the unfortunate Biggs went down.

Snapshot Sam heard, but never appeared to notice. His eyes never wandered from Captain Black.

"Turn around there, and tell your gang to hold back. I've got you fair and square, and you know it. Just five seconds to do it in."

Sam spoke softly and slow, but there was no mistaking his earnest intention.

"Ho, there! keep back!" shouted the captain, on the instant making his decision. "Give us

room until one of us goes up the flume. Then, you know what to do with him if I tumble."

That was all right with some of the curious that were peering in through the door; but there were others that didn't quite understand it. Here was a man they recognized as Sammy Sanders, and yet he was another man altogether.

And what was Chase doing with Miss Venner? There was something here that needed explanation, and they wanted it rather more than they did to hang Snapshot Sam, who had so mysteriously reappeared in the place of all places where they least expected to find him. Poison Pete was in the lead, and as he had good evidence that Jack Chase covered the door, and had the greatest respect for his prowess, he temporized.

"You, thar, John Chase! Ther boys ain't nothin' much ag'in' you; but they're bound ter hev ther gerloot ez hez wrung in a cold deck on Sammy, an' means ter git away with his sculp. He ain't no friend ov yours, an' he come nigh ter killin' yer wife an' bu'stin' you. Fur what yer backin' his game? Ther boys are all 'round ther house, he can't git away, an' what's ther use tryin' ter stand us off 'til he hez another murder ter hang fur? Better knuckle down tight, now, while yer hev ther chance. He ain't even givin' pore Sammy a show fur his white alley."

"Show—thunder! He's had too much show already, and if the Pistol Sharp was quick enough to get the drop, let him keep it. This is a private circus, Peter, and you stay out. You hear me warble?"

There was no answer. Pete was too much interested in what was going on. Snapshot Sam had thrust away his revolvers, and before Captain Black could fairly realize that they no longer covered him, the Pistol Sharp was advancing on him with a knife like his own.

There was a ringing clash of steel as the two men closed in; and though the morning sun was struggling through the windows, the light was none too good for men who were risking their lives on the keenness of their eyesight as well as the strength and suppleness of their wrists.

Cling, clang went the steel, there was a gleaming of blades, rapid thrusts, quick parries, a short dismal "chug" or two, and then the climax, as Captain Black, recovering from a fruitless stroke, dodged back until his head almost touched the wall.

Like a tiger Snapshot Sam sprung within his guard, striking a tremendous blow as he came.

Through and through the captain's neck pierced the blade. Then, with a low laugh, the Pistol Sharp stepped back, leaving his adversary impaled and actually pinned to the wall.

"Now, gentlemen, I'm ready to talk business to you. That individual was Captain Black, the road-agent. He might have held up hearses from now till the day of judgment, and I would never have interfered. But yonder woman was my wife—and he ran away with her. I heard of her being here, and at first suspected Mr. Chase. He has a clean bill, however, and when I got the two together, there wasn't any more room for doubt. I've done just exactly what any one of you would have done under the same circumstances, not counting on the fact that he set up a game to steal the Venner Mine, and another to have me hung. I'm not anxious to carry the thing any further, but if that isn't satisfactory, I'll cheerfully fight the town. You can take him down and nurse him if you want to, but it won't do him any good. If you nursed him up you would just put a rope 'round his neck by and by, and that would hurt. What do you say, now? Is it peace or war?"

"But who's vouchin' fur all this yarn?" asked Poison Pete in something of a judicial voice, while several others, pressing in, busied themselves with the dying man.

"I ain't wantin' ter doubt yer word, but ef Sammy Sanders war a road-agent, then folks ov Angels' Flat 'd like ter know jest how they war fooled. Snapshot Sam are a stranger hyar, an' his say-so don't make gospel."

"But I'm saying the same thing," said John Chase. "I think I got right down to bed-rock on this, and what I can't prove about him isn't worth knowing."

"And I'm backsettin' Johnny fur 'bout all I'm wu'th," added the voice of Plumb Center Pete. "Oh, there's bin some heap big 'velopement ez'll make yer git up an' howl ter think what's bin goin' on an' you not knowin' ov it. Av course ther Sharp hez bin takin' ther bread right outen my mouth, but I ain't goin' ter squeal, an' maybe I kin make a right smart deal outen ther corpse. You side-pards ov Capt'n Black don't yer draw an iron. We're hyar in force, an' ther fust move yer make, down yer all go. An' you men ov Angels' Flat ez hev kim in to ther death, lis'sen ter reason. We've got it down fine, an' ef ther's goin' ter be any more hocus-pocus over ther Big Hope, I want ter know."

As he spoke Blockey pressed forward, and at his back came Elder McKinzie and the men from the mine, with Kate Chase, Ernest Roget, the first Della Venner, and last of all, Katrina.

"Hector Fargo," exclaimed Kate, striding straight toward the dying Captain Black, "confess your sins!"

There was a low but horrible gurgle heard in

the hush that followed, the whitening lips fashioned the words, "Too late," and he fell back—dead.

"But what about my rights? I am Della Venner—Simon Venner's daughter; who will stand by me?"

The woman whom Kate had saved certainly had nerve enough to stick to her text, though she shrunk back a little at the harsh, cruel, though feminine laugh that answered her question.

"You may be Simon Venner's daughter, but your father no more owned the Big Hope than did mine. The game is up, what use to lie about it, Elsie Kane? We knew you were once Della Venner, and thought you were the true heiress. I stood ready to take your place; but to-night we knew at last that Dorris Lake and Kate Chase were one, and also that she was the daughter of Simon Lake, the man who struck it rich just a little ways up the mountain from the Flat. If we had known it sooner it would have made a vast difference, but it is too late to mourn over that. I don't even ask what is to become of me. I can wait and find out."

From the time John Chase's gripe had closed around her wrists, the women had never offered to struggle, and it was hard to say whether she was utterly reckless or entirely despairing.

"What she says is true," interposed Kate. "I am the daughter of the man known here as Simon Venner. John Chase is my brother and not my husband, and we have been hounding that man even as he hounded my father. I was through fear of him—knowing that he was coming to the neighborhood—that Simon Venner disappeared. In the disguise of Sammy Sanders I did not recognize him till the last moment, and then had to leave him, to work his will until a more convenient season. He is beyond fear or vengeance now."

"And, dog-gone him," whispered Sid Dare who had come into the Rest, "he fooled an old hand like me. While we were watching Johnny Chase and this new arrival, Snapshot Sam, he was laughing in his sleeve. But we partly tumbled to the daughter racket, and were ready for her—the she-tiger. She tried to kill Ed Cahill because he fancied he suspected, and stood in the way of some private explorations she wanted to make."

"I knew there was a mystery, but I took my chances. If all this is so, where is the real Simon Venner?"

"Here!" answered a sharp, quick voice. "A man will do a good deal to save his life; but blame me if he don't earn it when he has to wear petticoats."

Everybody looked around, puzzled for an instant! Then there was a roar of laughter, as Katrina waddled forward.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE END OF THE RACKET.

THE cook of the station created a decided sensation in the new role. Every neck was craned forward, and the majority of the boys were just struck dumb with amazement. It seemed a pity that Sammy Sanders couldn't have lived to know the rights of the story.

For a moment, though, some were inclined to doubt; and he turned to the crowd with an earnest effort to convince.

"You think I am throwing off—or, have you an idea that I'm not the simon-pure Katrina that beat the world on slapjacks and beans? If so you're fooled. Just wait until I wash and change my clothes. You'll see that I am the man, sure enough. And after all I've suffered I need a change. Bah! That bumper—if I did keep him at arm's length it was bad enough. My life hung on holding him, though, and keeping his true name from being suspected by Hector Fargo, who I knew, was somewhere in the bush! Gentlemen, back East they wanted to hang me for killing that selfsame Bobby Blue-nose, some twenty years ago. And Hector Fargo would have killed me and mine to fall heir to the Triplet fortune. Ha, ha! I've got the best part of it here, now, and this young man brought it."

He slapped Ernest Roget on the back as he ceased speaking, and his words were greeted with a cheer. There was no mistaking that voice, and the disappearance of Simon Venner was a mystery no longer.

Roget was rather more mystified than any one else, and he looked up inquiringly.

"You don't drop on. All right. Harmon Lake gave you a little box to give to Dorris. You thought it held nothing but papers, did you?"

Lake's voice had sunk almost to a whisper. There was no need for the world to know. Roget replied by a nod.

"And while you were fooling in the brush with Captain Black I was going through your luggage. I'll show you the Triplet diamonds by and by."

"And John Chase is really your son?"

"It is so reported, at least. The joke was that Black picked him up for a side pard, and brought him here to get the best of old Simon Venner. Black used to own the Best Chance, and it was he that pulled the string and let Snapshot through the trap; but Sam was too

quick for him, or his heelers would have killed him and laid the blame on John. He knew who he was the moment he saw him—and for that matter so did I. He was my old partner, and Elsie Kane's step-brother."

"And who in the name of wonder is she?"

"She was Della Venner before she was married and a widow. Not the worst in the world; but a bad lot anyhow. She gave me the credit of killing Sam and running off with the madame; and for that matter so did he. She got hold of one or two of my letters to Dorris, and then, thinking she and I were dead made a desperate throw for the Big Hope. It is worth half a million, my boy; and I don't blame her for trying, or myself for holding on."

"And Dorris—what can she think of me?"

"Ask her and find out—if you're not afraid to know. She has nerve all over, and a few accomplishments not usually taught in a young lady's seminary; but she is handsome as they make them, and true as steel. If I was a young man I think I would know the truth, anyhow."

"I will, by heavens, if I have the chance."

After that much of an explanation, it is scarcely worth while to take up all the 'fag-ends and run them out to the full limit.

Snapshot Sam's unworthy wife was still a woman, and though there was no doubt about her having been a confederate of Captain Black, in all of his schemes and many of his crimes, they turned her loose, and she drifted away, without making any threats or promises. What she might do in the future was discussed at numerous full sessions at Poison Pete's and the Best Chance, and various heads were gravely shaken over the possibilities of the case.

The Best Chance passed from the control of Mr. John Chase about the time he reassumed the name of Lake. He was an old sport, and all that, but he had only taken the saloon for a purpose, and though his partner had been able to befool him, almost to the last, he had the satisfaction of knowing that his purpose was finally accomplished.

Sid Dare and his two partners left Angel's Flat without having captured the road-agent chief they came specially to corral, or the murderer of Harmon Lake, of whom they thought they had scent, though they gathered in some of his men. Pete Blockey, who was about as much of a road-agent as he was detective, remained some time, hand in glove with the Lakes, and when he left he carried a *douceur* that was as satisfactory as the reward for Captain Black would have been.

Elsie Kane went back somewhat richer than when she came. Snapshot Sam, having changed his garb and his general appearance, acknowledged her as being one of the family, and as he was flush and careless, sent her away loaded with shekels and admonitions. Nevertheless she also will doubtless be heard from in the future.

Bobby Blue-nose was persuaded to go East for identification, after he was once satisfied that the little defalcation that sent him drifting had never been charged up against him. It never came out whose body it was that had been mistaken for that of his; but it was placed beyond doubt that it was one of Hector Fargo's victims.

Ernest Roget and Dorris? Well, she didn't mean all she said at odd times, by a good deal; and though he was not a dead shot or a seasoned Westerner, he was so nearly after her own heart, that when he talked serious business, in spite of all the scorn that she, at odd times, had heaped upon him, she said "Yes."

To this day there is some confusion in the minds of the people of the Flat—where a stock company has long owned the Big Hope. They are not certain at exactly what periods Snapshot Sam posed as Blue-nose Bobby, and Captain Black as the Pistol Sharp; but they are posted on Sammy Sanders and his neat little game, for Abilene Abe, just before he went over the range, made a confession so full that it was good for the soul, and it seemed that Blue-nose had been trusted as a sort of messenger and spy, and that Sam had personated the Bummer more than once in the camp of the outlaws. He was a man who had lived a varied life, had been at times a useful member of society, and again actor, change artist, juggler, acrobat—anything and everything, and when he came West on the trail of vengeance all that helped him.

Lake had made something of a mistake when he assumed the name of Venner, but he was thinking only of Hector Fargo, whom he feared and yet hoped to bring to just punishment. His masquerade was the ludicrous tint to the lurid tragedy, and it served at least one good purpose, since it enabled him to get Ernest Roget out of the way while he searched his baggage and forestalled Captain Black. Of course it was a surprise to the honest portion of the Flat to find how near the lurking-places of the outlaws had been, and how the road-agents had, unsuspected, mingled among them; but then, their work had been done at a distance, and at home they had, till the last moment, made no sign; so it had taken not only nerve and skill, but a great deal of luck to unravel their queer racket.

THE END.

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